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BARREN HONOUR.

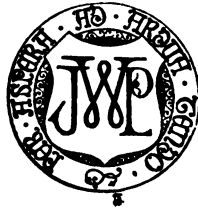
A TALE.

BY THE
AUTHOR OF 'GUY LIVINGSTONE.'

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

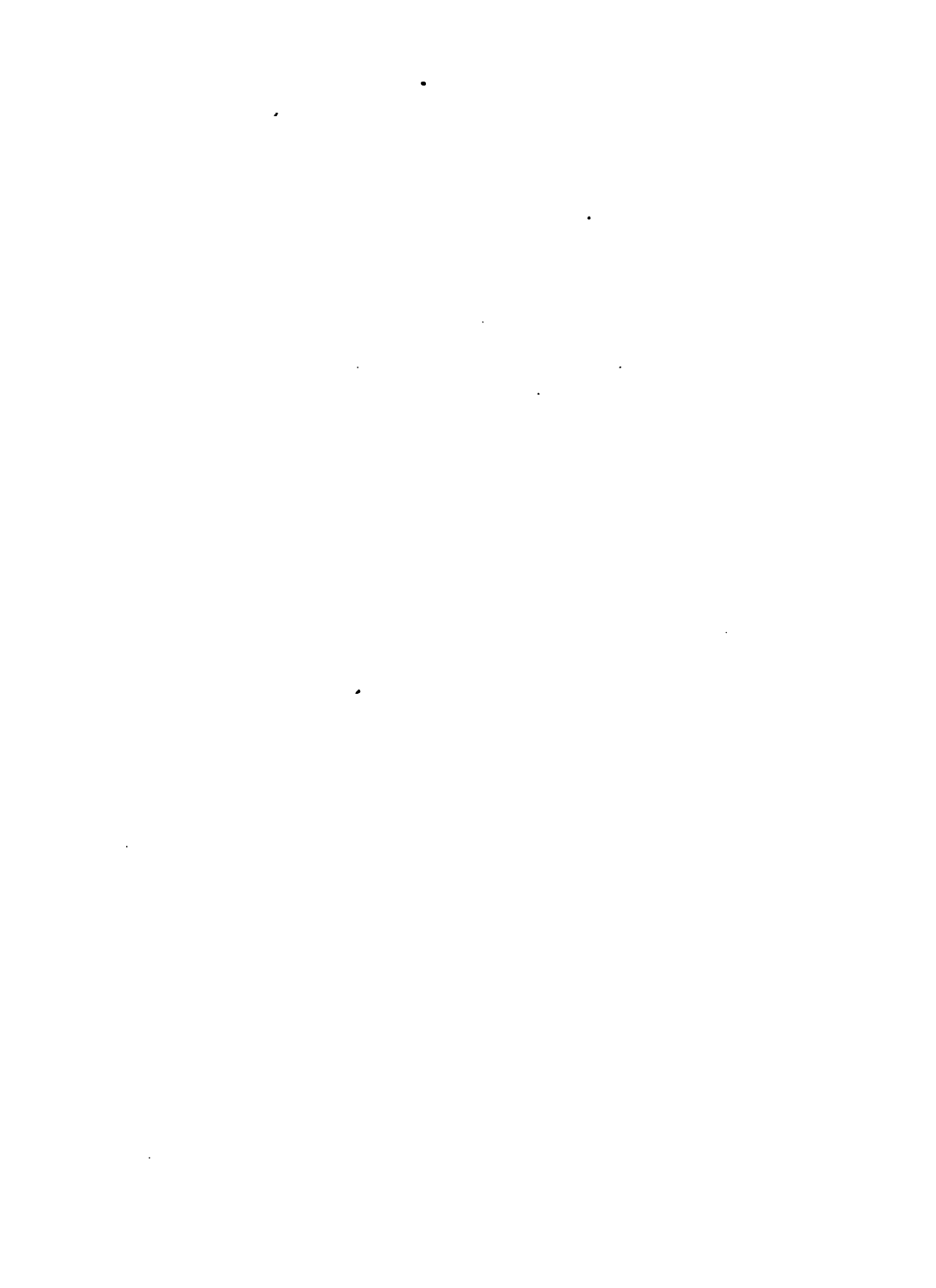
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BARREN HONOUR.

CHAPTER I.

THE LETTERS OF BELLEROPHON.

WYVERNE'S valedictory note to Mrs. Lenox, though kindly and courteous, was brief and decisive enough to satisfy Helen perfectly. The answer came in due course ; there was no anger or even vexation in its tone, but rather a sad humility—not at all what might have been expected from the proud, passionate, reckless *lionne*, who kept her sauciest smile for her bitterest foe, and scarcely ever indulged the dearest of her friends with a sigh. A perpetual warfare was waged between that beautiful Free Companion and all regular powers ; though often worsted and forced, for the moment, to give ground, she had never yet lost heart or shown sign of submission ; the poor little Amazonian target was sorely dented, and its gay blazoury nearly effaced, but the dauntless motto was still legible as ever—*L'Empire c'est la guerre.*

So for awhile there was peace at Dene, and yet, not perfect peace. Miss Vavasour's state of mind was by no means satisfactory; though it seemed, at the time, to recover perfectly from the sharp shock, it really never regained its healthy elastic tone. Miserable misgivings, that could hardly be called suspicions, would haunt her, though she tried hard not to listen to their irritating whispers, and always hated herself bitterly afterwards for her weakness. She felt how unwise it would be to show herself jealous or exacting, yet she could hardly bear Alan to be out of her sight, and when he was away, had no rest, even in her dreams. Her unknown correspondent, in a nice cynical letter, congratulated Helen on her good-nature and long-suffering, and hinted that Mrs. Lenox had been heard to express her entire approval of Alan's choice—'it would be very inconvenient, if there were bounds to the future Lady Wyverne's credulity.' She did not dare to confess to her cousin that she had read such a letter through, and so only took her mother into the secret. Lady Mildred testified a proper indignation at the spitefulness and baseness of the writer, but showed plainly enough that her own mind was by no means easy on the subject. All that day, and all that week, Miss Vavasour's temper was more than uncertain, and though no actual tempest broke, there

was electricity enough in the atmosphere to have furnished a dozen storms. 'My lady' had always indulged her daughter, but she took to humouring and petting her now, almost ostentatiously; the compassionate motive was so very evident, that instead of soothing the high-spirited demoiselle, it chafed her, at times, inexpressibly.

The change did not escape Alan Wyverne. He felt a desolate conviction that things were going wrong every way, but he was perfectly helpless, simply because there was nothing tangible to grapple with; he did not wish to call up evil spirits, merely to have the satisfaction of laying them. Helen's penitence after any display of waywardness or wickedness of temper was so charming, and the amends she contrived to make so very delicious, that her cousin found it the easiest thing imaginable to forgive; indeed, he would not have disliked that occasional petulance, if he had not guessed at the hidden cause. The only one of the party who failed to realize that anything had gone amiss, was the Squire; and perhaps even his gay genial nature would scarcely have enabled him to close his eyes to the altered state of things, if he had watched them narrowly; but, having once given his adhesion frankly and freely, he troubled himself little more about the course of the love-affair, relying upon

Alan's falling back on him as a reserve, if there occurred serious difficulty or obstacle. The troubles threatening his house, were quite enough to engross poor Hubert's attention just then.

A few weeks after the events recorded in that last chapter, Wyverne came down late, as was his wont. His letters were in their usual place on the breakfast table; on the top of the pile lay one, face downwards, showing with exasperating distinctness the fatal scarlet monogram.

Seldom in the course of his life had Alan been so intensely provoked. He felt angry with Nina Lenox for her folly and pertinacity—angry with the person unknown, whose stupidity or malice had put the dangerous document so obtrusively forward—angry, just a very little, with Helen, for betraying, by her heightened colour and nervous manner, that she had already detected the obnoxious letter—angrier than all with 'my lady,' whose quiet bright eyes seemed to rest on him, *judicially*, not caring to dissemble her suspicion of his guilt. It is always unwise, of course, to act on impulse, and of all impulses, anger is supposed to be the most irrational. Such folly was the more inexcusable in Wyverne, because his power of self-command was quite exceptional: it only enabled him, now, to preserve a perfect outward composure; he acted just as stupidly and

viciously as if he had given way to a burst of passion. In the first five seconds he had fully determined to burn that letter, unread—a most sage resolve, certainly—the only pity was, that he could not bring himself to execute his purpose there and then, or at all events confide his intention to the parties most interested therein. But you must understand that Alan—with all his chivalrous devotion to womankind—held orthodox notions (so *we* should say) as to the limits of their powers, and by no means favoured any undue usurpation of the Old Dominion; he held, for instance, that the contents of the post-bag, unless voluntarily confided, should be kept as sacred from feminine curiosity as the secrets of the Rosicrucians. In the present case, he could hardly blame Helen for betraying consciousness of a fact that had been, so to speak, ‘*flashed*’ before her eyes; but he felt somehow as if she ought to have ignored it. He would not make the smallest concession. I have told you how obstinate and unrelenting the frank, kindly nature could at times become: the shadow of a great disaster was closing round him fast, and his heart was hardened now, even as the heart was hardened of that unhappy King, predestined to be a world’s wonder, whom the torments of nine plagues only confirmed in his fell purpose—‘not to let Israel go.’

He pushed all the letters aside with an impatient movement of his arm, and thrust them into the pocket of his shooting-jacket before he left the table, without opening one of them. All through breakfast he persisted in talking carelessly on indifferent subjects, in spite of the evident discomfort and nervousness of his cousin, and the reticence of 'my lady;' eventually he had to fall back on the Squire, who, ignorant of this fresh cause of discord as he had been of the former one, was open to any fair offer in the way of conversation.

An hour or so later, as Wyverne was going down to his uncle's room (they were to shoot some small outlying covers) he met Helen in the picture-gallery.

'I suppose you are aware that a letter came for me this morning from Mrs. Lenox?' he said.

There was no particular reason why Miss Vavasour should feel guilty, and blush painfully, nevertheless she did both, as she answered him.

'Yes, Alan, I could not help seeing it, you know, and—'

He interrupted her, somewhat impatiently.

'Of course you could not help it, child. You were bound to remark it, where it lay. I suppose it was so foreordained by Fate, or some more commonplace power. I know it worried you; but;

indeed, it vexed me quite as much. I have no idea what she wrote about, for I burnt the letter half an hour ago, without breaking the seal.'

Helen did not answer at once, and when she looked up, for the first time in their lives her cousin read uncertainty in her eyes. His own face grew dark and stern.

'Ah, Helen, it cannot have come to this, yet—that you doubt me when I state a simple fact.'

Her cheek had paled within the last few seconds, but it crimsoned now from very shame.

'No, no, Alan,' she said impetuously, 'I don't doubt you. I never do, when I am myself; but sometimes I feel so changed—so wicked——'

Wyverne would not let her go on; but the kiss which closed her lips carried scarcely more of caress than did his voice, as he answered what she meant to say,

'My own, I guess it all. It is a hard battle when such as you and I have to fight against principalities and powers. I feel we are not cool and crafty enough to hold our own. God knows how it will all end—and when. The sooner, perhaps the better for you. But if they would only let *you* alone, darling! It has been my fault from the first, and I ought to have all the trouble and pain. But indeed, now, I have done my best. I burnt the

letter unread, and I have written six lines to tell Mrs. Lenox so. Now, we wont speak of it any more just now. There can be no repetition of *this* annoyance, at all events. Will you tell Aunt Mildred what I have done? *I* had better not enter into the subject with her, that's certain.'

Wyverne's perfect sincerity carried all before it, for the moment ; when he left her, Helen felt happier than she had done for days. Even had it been otherwise, of course she would have made the best of it to her mother. It is the woman's way, you know—at least till, with middle age, wisdom has waxed and passionate affection has waned—if in anywise maltreated by her lover, she will make her moan loudly enough to *him*, but she will tax her little ingenuity to the utmost, to palliate that same offence to her nearest and dearest friend.

It was well that Helen's spirits were high, when she went to her audience in the boudoir ; certes she reaped small encouragement there. Lady Mildred was by no means disposed to be enthusiastic or unreserved in her trustfulness, and, indeed, hinted her doubts and fears and general disapprobation, much more plainly than she had hitherto done. She believed Alan *now*, of course, but she could not help thinking that the relations between him and Mrs. Lenox must have been far more intimate than she

had had any idea of. It would have been much more satisfactory, if he could have opened the letter and shown it to Helen. So he had written to say what he had done? That was right, at all events. (What made 'my lady' smile so meaningly just then?) But every day made her more fearful about the future.

'I ought to have been firmer at first, darling,' she murmured.

The look of self-reproach was a study, and the penitential sigh rightly executed to a breath.

'It is not that I doubt Alan's meaning fairly; indeed, I believe he does his best; but when a man has lived that wild life, old connexions are very difficult to shake off; sometimes it is years before he is quite free. You don't understand these things; but I do, my Helen, and I know how you would suffer. You are not cold blooded enough to be patient or prudent. Even now, see how unhappy you have been at times lately. I was very weak and very wrong.'

It is not worth while recording Helen's indignant disclaimer and eager profession of faith, especially as neither in anywise disturbed or affected the person to whom they were addressed. 'My lady' kissed the fair enthusiast, with intense fondness, but not in the least sympathetically or impulsively, and

went on with her scruples and regrets and future intentions as if no interruption had occurred. There ensued a certain amount of desultory discussion, warm only on one side, it is needless to say. Lady Mildred did not actually bring maternal authority to the front, but she was *very* firm. At last it came to this. 'My lady' was understood to have taken up a fresh position, and now to disapprove actively; but she consented to take no offensive step, nor even to mention the changed state of her feelings to the Squire or Alan Wyverne, till some fresh infraction of the existing treaty should justify her in doing so. Then, the crisis was to be sharp and decisive. This was all Helen could gain after much pleading, and perhaps it was as much as could be expected. The Absent, who are always in the wrong, don't often come off so well.

The instant her daughter left her, Lady Mildred rang for her own maid, and said a dozen words to the attentive Abigail; though they were alone in the boudoir, she whispered them. All outward-bound letters at Dene were placed in a certain box, which was kept locked till they were transferred to the post-bag. The confidential *cameriste* carried on her watch-chain several keys, one of which fitted the letter-box with curious exactness. It was not often used; but in the dusk of the evening a small slight

figure, with a footfall soft and light as the velvet tread of a cheetah, might have been seen (if she had not chosen her time so well) flitting through the great hall, and tarrying for a few seconds in that special corner.

That day there were two letters burnt at Dene, both with their seals unbroken.

Though all was not bitter in her recollections of the last twenty-four hours—those few minutes in the picture-gallery told heavily on the right side—Miss Vavasour's state of mind, when she woke on the following morning, was none of the pleasantest or calmest. Her mother's overt opposition did not dismay or discourage her much; for, after the grateful excitement of the first interview had passed away, she had entertained in spite of herself certain misgivings as to the duration, if not the genuineness, of 'my lady's' favour, or even neutrality. But the demoiselle could not deny to herself—though she had denied it to her mother—that the latter had spoken truly with regard to her own present unhappiness, and wisely as to the perils of the future. Helen's heart, brave as it was, sank within her as she thought of what it would be if she were destined to experience for years the wearing alternations of hope and fear, pleasure and pain, that had been her portion only for a few weeks. She did believe in

her cousin's good faith *almost* implicitly (there was a qualification now), but she did not feel sure that he would always resist temptations; and, even with her slight knowledge of the world, she guessed that such might beset his path dangerously often. New enemies to her peace might arise any day; and Nina Lenox's pertinacity showed plainly enough how loth Alan's old friends were to let him go free. Could *she* wonder at their wishing to keep him at all risks, so as at least to hear the sound of his voice sometimes—she, who could never listen to it when softened to a whisper, without a shiver and a tingle in her veins?

‘Nina!’

As she uttered that word aloud, and fancied how he might have spoken it, and might speak it again, black drops of bitterness welled up in the girl's heart, poisoning all its frank and generous nature: she set her little white teeth hard, and clenched her slender fingers involuntarily, with a wicked vengeful passion. If wishes could kill, I fear Nina Lenox would have been found next morning dead and cold. Helen had seen her fancied rival once—at the great archery-meeting of the Midland shires—and even her inexperience had appreciated the fascinations of that dark dangerous beauty. She remembered, right well, how one man after another drew near the low

seat on which Mrs. Lenox leant back, almost reclining, and how the lady never deigned to disturb her queenly languor by an unnecessary look or word, till one of her especial friends came up ; she remembered how the pale statuesque face brightened and softened then ; how the rosy lips bestirred themselves to murmur quick and low ; and how from under the long heavy eyelashes glances stole out, that Helen felt were eloquent, though she could not quite read their meaning. She remembered watching all this, standing close by, and how the thought had crossed her heart, How pleasant it must be, to hold such power.

Do you suppose that, because Miss Vavasour did perhaps more than justice to the charms of the woman she had lately learned to hate, she was unconscious of her own, or modestly disposed to undervalue them ? It was not so. Helen was perfectly aware, that she herself was rarely lovely and unusually fascinating. If she had been cool enough to reason dispassionately, she would probably have acknowledged that comparison might safely be defied. Both flowers were passing fair ; but on the one lingered still the dewy bloom and scented freshness of the morning ; the other, though delicate in hue and full of fragrance still, bore tokens on her petals, crisped here and there and slightly faded, of storm-

showers and a fiery noon ; nor, at her best, could she ever have matched her rival in brilliancy of beauty.

But, supposing that Miss Vavasour had over-estimated herself and under-estimated her enemy to such a point, as to imagine any comparison absurd, do you imagine it would have lightened one whit her trouble, or softened her bitterness of heart? I think not.

Feminine jealousy is not to be judged by the standard of ordinary ethics : you must measure it by the ' Lesbian rule,' if at all, and will probably, even so, be wrong in your result. Not only is its field more vast, its phases more varied, but it differs surely in many essentials from the same passion in our sex. Don't be alarmed : I have no intention of writing an essay on so tremendous a subject. The pen of Libyan steel, that the old chroniclers talk about, would be worn down before it was exhausted. Take one distinction as an example. I suppose it is because we have more of conceit, pure and simple ; but, when we once thoroughly establish the fact, that the man preferred before us is really and truly our inferior in every way, it helps materially to soften the disappointment. Comfortable self-complacency disposes us to be charitable, compassionate, and forgiving ; we try (not unsuccessfully) to think,

that the bad taste displayed by the Object is rather her misfortune than her fault; nor do we nourish enduring malice even to him who bears away the bride. Remember the story of Sir Gawaine. When the huge black-browed carle would have reft from him his dame by force, he bouned himself to do battle to the death; but when the lady had once made her choice, the Knight of the Golden Tongue thought no more of strife, but rode on his way, resigned if not rejoicing. With our sisters it is not so. Let a woman realize ever so completely the inferiority of her rival,—moral, physical, and social—it will not remove one of her suspicious fears, nor dull the sting of discomfiture when it comes, nor teach forgetfulness of the bitter injury in after-days.

When wild Kate Goring created universal scandal and some surprise by eloping with that hirsute riding-master, Cecil Hamersley was intensely disgusted at first, but did not nurse his griefs or his wrath long: when the unlucky couple came to the grief which was inevitable, Kate's jilted lover pitied them from the bottom of his great honest heart, and seemed to think it the most natural thing in the world, that he should help them to the utmost of his power. It was entirely through Cecil, that Mr. Martingale was enabled to start in the horse-dealing

business, which he has conducted with average honesty and fair success ever since.

Take a converse example. Ivor Montresor, for the last year or more, has been laying his homage at the feet of Lady Blanche Pendragon, and it has been accepted, not ungraciously ; at the end of last season it was understood that it was nearly a settled thing. But the wooer has not displayed intense eagerness since in pressing on the preliminaries. There is a certain Annie Fern, whose duty it is to braid the somewhat scanty gold of Lady Blanche's tresses—the most captivating little witch imaginable, with the most provoking of smiles, that contrasts charmingly with her long, pensive, dark-grey Lancashire eyes. She is prettier a thousand-fold, and pleasanter, and really better educated, than the tall, frigid, indolent descendant of King Uther whom she has the honour to serve ; but that is no excuse, of course, for Ivor's infatuation. A dreadful whisper has got abroad of late, that he admires the maid above the mistress. Lady Blanche is supposed to be not unconscious of all this ; but, if she guessed it, she would not deign to notice it in any way, or even to discharge her fatally attractive handmaid. Let us hope that the vagrant knight will be recalled to a sense of his duty, and, remembering that he is a suitor nearly accepted, 'act as such.' However

it may turn out, let us hope for Annie's sake (she has been absolutely innocent of intriguing throughout), that it will never happen to her 'to be brought low even to the ground, and her honour laid in the dust;'—in such a case, I know *who* will be the first to set the heel of her slender brodequin on the poor child's neck, and keep it there too.

No; that conscious superiority does not help them at all. As it is now, so it was in the ancient days. Did it much avail Calypso, that in her realm there was wealth of earth's fairest fruits and flowers, while in Ithaca it was barren all—that ages passed over her own divine beauty, leaving no furrow on her brow, no line of silver in her hair, while with every year the colour faded from the cheek, and the fire died out of the eyes of her mortal rival—if her guest still persisted in repining? Be sure she never felt more wretched and helpless than when, wreathing her swan's neck haughtily, she spoke those words of scorn:

Οὐ μὲν θην κείνης γε χερσίων εὐχομαι εἶναι,
Οὐ δέμας, οὐδὲ φῦν, ἐπεὶ σὺ πως οὐδὲ ζοικεν
Θνητὰς ἀθάνατῃσι δέμας καὶ εἶδος ἐρίζειν.

O gentle Goddess! would your kindly heart have been most pained or pleased, if you could have guessed how ample was the final retribution? You

never knew how often—wearied by petty public broils, worried by Penelope's shrill shrewish tongue, overborne by the staid platitudes of the prim respectable Telemachus—your ancient lover strode over bleak rocks and gusty sandhills, till his feet were dipped in the seething foam, and he stood straining his eyes seaward, and drinking in the wind that he fancied blew from Ogygia,—the island to which no prow of mortal ever found the backward track. You never knew how often his thoughts rushed back, with a desperate longing and vain regret, to the great cave shrouded by the vine heavy with clusters of eternal grapes, deep in the greenwood where the wild birds loved to roost, girdled by the meadows thick with violets—where cedar and frankincense burned brightly on the hearth, making the air heavy with fragrance—where the wine, that whoso drank became immortal, mantled ever in unstinted goblets—where you bent over your golden shuttle singing a low sweet song—where your dark divine eyes never wearied in their welcome.

I have always thought that, of all men alive or dead, of all characters in fact or fiction, Odysseus, in his declining years, must have been the most intensely bored. But then, you know, though passing wise in his generation, he was wholly a pagan

and half a barbarian. Far be it from me to insinuate, that any Christian and civilized Wanderer, when once reinstated in his domestic comforts, ever wastes a regret on a lost love beyond the sea.

CHAPTER II.

PAVIA.

IT is said, that when a man is struck blind by lightning, he never forgets afterwards the minutest object on which his eyes rested when the searing flash shot across them. Even so, when the crash of the great misfortune is over, and we wake from dull heavy insensibility to find the light gone out of our life for ever, we remember with unnatural distinctness the most trivial incidents of the last hour of sunshine ; we actually seem to see them over again sometimes, as we grope our way, hopelessly and helplessly, through the darkness that will endure till it is changed into night ; for it may be, that from our spirit's eyes the blinding veil will never be lifted, till they unclothe in the dawn of the Resurrection.

Both the cousins had good cause to treasure in their memories, every word and gesture that passed between them on one particular evening ; for it was the last—the very last—of pure unalloyed happiness

that either of them ever knew. Years afterwards, Wyverne could have told you to a shade the colour of the ribbons on Helen's dress, the fashion of the bracelets on each of her wrists, the scent of the flowers she wore. She, too, remembered right well his attitude when they parted; she could have set her foot on the very square of marble on which his was planted; she could recal the exact intonation of his gentle voice, as he bade her farewell on the lowest step of the great staircase, for he was to start very early the next morning. She remembered, too, how that night she lingered before a tall pier-glass, passing her hands indolently through her magnificent hair, while the light fell capriciously on the dark shining masses, rejoicing in the contemplation of her surpassing loveliness; she remembered how she smiled at her image in saucy triumph, as the thought rose in her heart—that Nina Lenox's mirror held no picture like this.

Ah, Helen, better it were the glass had been broken then; it may show you, in after years, a face disdainful of its own marvellous beauty, or tranquil in its superb indifference, according to your varying mood; but a happy one—never any more.

The Squire had to go to town for a few days, and Alan, who had also business there, accompanied him. They were to be back for Christmas-day—the last in

that week. Wyverne got through his affairs quicker than he had anticipated, so he determined to return a day sooner without waiting for his uncle. His evil Genius was close to his shoulder even here ; for, if Hubert Vavasour had been present, it is just possible, though not probable, that things might have gone differently.

Alan started by an early train, so that he arrived at Dene soon after midday. Perhaps it was fancy, but he thought that the face of the Chief Butler wore rather a curious and troubled expression ; if it were possible for that sublimely vacuous countenance to betray any human emotion, something like a compassionate interest seemed to ruffle its serenity. The letters of expected visitors were always placed on a particular table in the great hall. Again—on the top of the pile waiting for Alan—lay one in the well-known handwriting of Nina Lenox. This time it was placed naturally, with the seal downwards.

The first, the very first imprecation that had ever crossed Wyverne's lips in connexion with womankind, passed them audibly, when his eye lighted on the fatal envelope. He knew right well that it held the death-warrant of his love ; but even now the curse was not levelled at the authoress of his trouble, but at his own evil fortune. As he took up the

letters, he asked, half mechanically, where his aunt and cousin were. The answer was ominous :

‘My lady was exceedingly unwell and confined to her room. Miss Vavasour was somewhere in the Pleasance, but she wished to be sent for as soon as Sir Alan arrived.’ He had written the night before, to say he was coming.

Wyverne walked on into the library without another word. For the moment he felt stupid and helpless, like a man just waking after an overdose of narcotics. He sat down, and began turning the letter over and over as if he were trying to guess at its contents. From its thickness it was evidently a long one—two or three note-sheets at least. A very few minutes, however, brought back his self-composure entirely, and he knew what he had to do. It was clear the letter could not be burnt unopened, this time. He drew his breath hard once, and set his teeth savagely ; then he tore the envelope and began to read deliberately.

Alan once said, when he happened to be discussing feminine ethics,—‘I can conceive women affecting one with any amount of pain or pleasure ; but I don’t think anything they could do would ever *surprise* me.’ Rash words those—perhaps they deserved confutation ; at any rate the speaker was thoroughly astounded now. He knew that no look

or syllable had ever passed between himself and Nina Lenox that could be tortured into serious love-making; yet this letter of hers was precisely such as might have been written by a passionate, sinful woman, to the man for whom she had sacrificed enough, to make her desertion almost a second crime. There was nothing of romance in it—nothing that the most indulgent judge could construe into Platonic affection—it was miserably *practical* from end to end. No woman alive, reading such words addressed to her husband or her lover, could have doubted, for a second, what his relations with the writer had been, even if they were ended now. Griselda herself would have risen in revolt. It is needless to give even the heads of that delectable epistle. Mrs. Lenox acknowledged that she wrote in despite of Alan's repeated prohibition; but—*c'était plus fort qu'elle*, and all the rest of it. One point she especially insisted on. However *he* might scorn her, surely he would not give *others* the right to do so? He would burn the letter, she knew he would, without speaking of it, far less showing it, to any human being; she suffered enough, without having her miserable weakness betrayed for the amusement of Miss Vavasour.

Every line that Alan read increased his bewilderment. Was it possible that dissipation, and trouble,

and intrigue had told at last on the busy brain, so that it had utterly given way? Such things had been; there was certainly something strange and unnatural in the character of the writing, sometimes hurried till the words ran into each other, sometimes laboured and constrained as if penned by a hand that hesitated and faltered. He knew that Nina was rash beyond rashness, and would indulge her sudden caprices at any cost, without reckoning the sin or even the shame, but he could not believe in such a wild *velleité* as this.

‘She must be mad.’

Wyverne spoke those words aloud; they were answered by a sigh, or rather a quick catching of the breath, close to his shoulder; he started to his feet, and stood face to face with Helen Vavasour, who had entered unobserved while he sat in his deep reverie.

Helen was still in her walking-dress; a fall of lace slightly shaded her brow and cheeks, but it could not dissemble the bright feverish flush that made the white pallor of all the lower part of the face more painfully apparent; the pupils of her great eyes were contracted, and they glittered with the strange *serpentine* light which is one of the evidences of poison by belladonna; but neither cheeks nor eyes bore trace of a tear. She had schooled herself

to speak quite deliberately and calmly ; the effect was apparent, not only in the careful accentuation of each syllable, but in her voice—neither harsh nor hollow, yet utterly changed.

‘Mad, Alan? Yes, we have all been mad. It is time that this should come to an end. You think so, too, I am sure.’

Wyverne had known, from the first moment that he saw the letter, how it would fare with him ; but the bitter irritation which had hardened his heart on a former occasion was not there now ; he could not even be angry with those who had brought him to this pass ; all other feelings were swallowed up in an intense, half-unselfish sorrow.

‘Dear child, it *is* more than time that you should be set free from me and my miserable fortunes. We will drift away, alone, henceforth, as we ought always to have done. It was simply a sin, ever to have risked dragging you down with the wreck ; it must founder soon. Ah, remember, I said so once, and you—never mind that—I’ll make what amends I can ; but I have done fearful harm already. Three months more of this, would wear you out in mind and body ; even now they will tell in your life like years. We must part now. Darling, try to forget, and to forgive, too—for you have much to forgive.’

He stopped for a moment, but went on quickly,

answering the wild, haggard question of her startled eyes ; she had understood those last words wrongly.

‘ No—not that ;’ he struck the letter he still held, impatiently, with a finger of the other hand. ‘ I told you once, I would never ask you to believe me again as you did then. I don’t ask you to act as if you believed, now. But, Helen, you will know one day before we die, whether I have been sinned against or sinning in this thing ; I feel sure of it, or—I should doubt the justice of God.’

The soft, sad voice quite broke down the calmness it had cost Helen so much to assume ; she could not listen longer, and broke in with all her own impetuosity—

‘ Ah, Alan ! don’t ask it ; it is not right of you. You know I *must* believe whatever you tell me, and I dare not—do you hear—I dare not, now. It is too late. I have promised—’ and she stopped, shivering.

Wyverne’s look was keen and searching ; but it was not at *her* that his brows were bent. He took the little trembling hand in his own, and tried to quiet the leaping pulses, and his tones were more soothing than ever.

‘ I know it all, darling ; I know how bravely you have tried to keep your faith with me ; I shall thank you for it to my life’s end, not the less because

neither you nor I were strong enough to fight against fate, and—Aunt Mildred. I cannot blame her : if I could, *you* should not hear me. She was right to make you promise before you came here. It was unconditionally, of course ?’

The girl’s cheek flushed painfully.

‘There was a condition,’ she murmured under her breath ; ‘but I hardly dare. Yes ; I dare say anything—to you. Mamma sent for me when that letter came, or I should never have heard of it. She did not say how *she* knew. You cannot think how determined she is. I *was* angry at first ; but when I saw how hard she was, I was frightened ; and, Alan, indeed, indeed I did all I could to soften her. At last she said that she would not insist on my giving you up, if—if you would show me that letter. Ah, Alan—what have *I* done ?’

He had dropped her hand before she ended, and stood looking at her with an expression that she had never dreamt could dwell in his eyes—repellant to the last degree, too cold and contemptuous for anger. It softened, though, in a second or two at the sight of Helen’s distress.

‘Did you doubt what my answer would be ? I am very sure your mother never doubted : she knew me better.’

No answer ; but she bowed her beautiful head

till it could rest on his arm ; a stormy sob or two made her slender frame quiver down to the feet ; and then, with a rush like that of Undine's unlocked well, the pent-up tears came. The passion-gust soon passed away ; and her cousin kept silence till Helen was calm again ; then he spoke very gently and gravely.

‘ Do forgive me ; I did not mean to be harsh. You only gave your message, I know ; but it was like a stab to hear your lips utter it. Child, look up at me, and listen. I need not tell you I am speaking God's truth—you feel it. You know what I have done to stop these accursed letters. I believe the writer to be mad ; but that will not help us. I think I would stand by and see her burned at the stake, as better women have been before her, if by that sacrifice I could keep your love. But—if I knew, that by this one act I could make you my very own, so that nothing but the grave could part us—I would not show you a line of her letter. It may be, that there are higher duties which justify the betrayal of an unhappy woman, when her very confidence is a sin. I dare say I am wrong in my notions of honour, as well as in other things ; but, such as they are, I'll stand by them to the death, and—to what I think must be harder to bear than death. I don't hesitate, because I have no choice.

I know that I am casting, this moment, my life's happiness away: Helen—see—my hand does not tremble.'

He tossed the letter as he spoke into the wood fire blazing beside them; it dropped between two huge red logs, and, just flashing up for a second, mingled with the heap of ashes.

Now, Wyverne's conduct will appear to many absurdly Quixotic, and some will think it deserves a harsher name than folly. I decline to argue either point. It seems to me—when one states fairly at the beginning of a story, 'that it has no Hero'—the writer is by no means called upon to identify himself with the sentiments of his principal character, much less to defend them. I have not intended to hold up Alan Wyverne either as a model or a warning. He stands there just for what he is worth—a man not particularly wise or virtuous or immaculate, but frank and affectionate by nature, with firmness enough to enable him to act consistently according to the light given him. Whether that light was a false one or no, is a question that each particular reader may settle *à son gré*. Purely on the grounds of probability, I would suggest that others have sacrificed quite as much for scruples quite as visionary. Putting aside the legions of lives that have been thrown away on doubtful points of social

professional honour, have not staid and grave men submitted to the extremes of penury, peril, and persecution, because they would not give up some favourite theory involving no question of moral right or wrong? The *Peine forte et dure* could scarcely have been an agreeable process; yet a Jesuit chose to endure it, and died under the iron press, rather than plead before what he held to be an incompetent tribunal. You constantly say of such cases, 'One can't help respecting the man, to a certain extent.' Now, I don't ask you to respect Alan Wyverne: it is enough, if you admit that his folly was not without parallels.

Among those who could blame or despise him, Helen Vavasour was not numbered: she never felt more proud of her lover than at that moment when his own act had parted them irrevocably. She was not of the 'weeping-willow' order, you know: the tears still hanging on her eyelashes were the first she had shed since childhood in serious sorrow. Quick and impetuous enough in temper, she was so unaccustomed to indulge in any violent demonstration of feeling, that she felt somewhat ashamed of having yielded to it now. But the brief outbreak did her good; it lightened her brain and brought back elasticity to her nerves. There is nothing like a storm for clearing the atmosphere. Nevertheless,

the haughty, bold spirit was for the moment thoroughly beaten down. There was something in her accent piteous beyond the power of words to describe, as she whispered half to herself,

‘Yes, we must part; but it is too, too hard.’

‘Hardest of all,’ he said, ‘to part on a pretext like this. There is either madness, or magic, or black treachery against me, I swear. Some day we shall know. But, darling, sooner or later it must have come. I have felt that for weeks past, though I tried hard to delude myself. I must say good-bye to Dene in an hour. When shall I see the dear old house again? I am so sorry for Uncle Hubert, too. If he had been here—no, perhaps it is best so—there would have been more wounded, and we could never have won the day.’

‘Don’t go yet; ah, not yet’—the sweet voice pleaded—all its dangerous melody had stolen back to it now, and lithe fingers twined themselves round Alan’s, as though they would never set him free.

But Wyverne was aware that the self-control which had carried him through so far, was nearly exhausted. He had to think for *both*, you see; and it was the more trying, because the part of Moderator was so utterly new to him; nevertheless, he played it honestly and bravely.

‘I dare not stay. I *must* see Uncle Hubert

before I sleep; and it is only barely possible, if I leave Dene in half an hour. Listen, my Helen: I am not saying good-bye to *you*, though I say it to our past. I lose my wife; but I do not intend to lose my cousin. I will see you again as soon as I can do so safely. A great black wall is built up now, between the future, and all that we two have said and done: I will never try to pass it again by thought or word. You will forget all this. Hush, dear. You think it impossible at this moment, but *I* know better. You will play a grand part in the world one of these days, and perhaps you may want a friend—a real friend. Then you shall think of me. I will help you with heart and hand as long as life lasts; and I will do so in all truth and honour—as I hope to meet my dead mother, and Gracie, and you, in heaven.'

She did not answer him in words. The interview lasted about a hundred seconds longer, but I do not feel called upon to chronicle the last details. Writers, as well as narrators, have a right to certain reserves.

Alan Wyverne was away from Dene before the half hour was out; but he left a sealed note behind him for his aunt. 'My lady' was waiting the issue somewhat anxiously; it is needless to say, her health was the merest pretext. She read the note

through calmly enough ; but, when she opened her escritoire to lock it up safely, her hands shook like aspen-leaves, and she drank off eagerly the strongest dose of ' red lavender ' that had passed her lips for many a day.

Does not that decisive interview seem absurdly abrupt and brief ? It is true that I have purposely omitted many insignificant words and gestures ; but if all these had been chronicled, it would still have been disappointingly matter-of-fact and meagre.

Nevertheless—believe it—to build up a life's happiness is a work of time and labour, aided by great good fortune : to ruin and shatter it utterly is a question of a short half hour, even where no ill luck intervenes. It took months of toil to build the good ship *Hesperus*, though her timbers were seasoned and ready to hand ; it took hours of trouble to launch her when thoroughly equipped for sea ; but it took only a few minutes of wave-and-wind-play, to shiver her into splinters, when her keel crushed down on the reef of Norman's Woe.

CHAPTER III.

MISANTHROPOS.

ON the morning after the most disastrous of all his bad nights at hazard, Charles Fox was found by a friend who called, in fear and trembling, to offer assistance or condolence, lying on his sofa in lazy luxury, deep in an eclogue of Virgil. The magnificent indifference was probably not assumed, for there was little tinsel about that large honest nature, and he was not the man to indulge in private theatricals. Since I read that anecdote, I have always wondered that the successes achieved by the great Opposition leader were not more lasting and complete. Among the triumphs of mind over matter, that power, of thoroughly abstracting the thoughts from recent grief or trouble, seems to stand first and foremost. Such sublime stoicism implies a strength of character and of will, that separates its possessor at once from his fellows: sooner or later, He must rule, and they must obey.

Alan Wyverne was not so rarely gifted. The bustle of the hurried journey from Dene to the railroad, and the uncertainty about catching the train, helped him at first; but when all that was over, and he was fairly on his way to town, he was forced to *think*, whether he would or no. Anything was better than brooding over the past; he tried desperately to force his thoughts into the immediate future—to imagine what he should say to his uncle, and how the Squire would take the heavy tidings. The effort was worse than vain. The strong stream laughed at the puny attempts to stem it, sweeping all such obstacles away, as it rushed down its appointed channel. All the plans he had talked over with Helen, even to the smallest details of their proposed domestic economy, came back one by one; he remembered every word of their last playful argument, when he tried to persuade her that certain luxuries for her boudoir at Wyverne Abbey were necessities not to be dispensed with; he remembered how they had speculated as to the disposal of the money, if his solitary bet on the next Derby, 1000 to 10 about a rising favourite—should by any chance come off right; how they had weighed gravely the advantages of three months of winter in Italy against the pleasures of an adventurous expedition whose turning-point should be the Lebanon. What did it

matter now who won or lost? Was it only yesterday that he had an interest in all these things? Yesterday—between him and that word there seemed already a gulf of years. Yesterday, he had felt so proud in anticipating the triumphs of his beautiful bride; now, he could only think of her certain success with a heavy sinking of the heart, or a hot fierce jealousy; for she was all his own treasure then; one night had made her the World's again. That miserable journey scarcely lasted four hours; but when it ended, Wyverne was as much morally changed as he might have been, physically, by a long wasting sickness.

Does it seem strange that a man, who up to this time had met all reverses with a careless gaiety that was almost provoking, should go down so helplessly now before a blow that would scarcely stagger many of our acquaintance? A great deal, in such cases, depends on the antecedents. Human nature, however elastic and enduring, will only stand a certain amount of 'beating.' When Captain Lyndon is in good luck and good funds, he accepts the loss of a hundred or two with dignified equanimity, if not with chirping cheerfulness; but supposing the bad night comes at the end of a long evil 'vein'—when financial prospects are gloomier than the yellow fog outside—when the face of his banker is set against

him, as it were a millstone—when that reckless soldier

Would liever mell with the fiends of hell,
Than with Craig's-Court and its band?

O, my friend! I marvel not that a muttered imprecation shot out from under your moustache, last night, when the Queen of Hearts showed her comely face—your adversaries having the deal, at three.

Now Alan Wyverne had been playing for his last stake, so far as he knew: he had put it down with some diffidence and hesitation, and it had followed the rest into the gulf, leaving him without a chance of winning back his losses. Under the circumstances some depression, surely, was not wholly despicable. Remember, he was not so young as he had been: though still on the better side of middle age, he had in many ways anticipated his prime, and had not much left to look forward to.

Qu'on est bien dans un grenier
Quand on a vingt ans!

So sings Béranger, well, if not wisely. But—add another score of years or so—what will the lodger say of his quarters? Those seven flights of stairs are dark and steep; the bread is hard and tasteless; the wine painfully sour and thin; the fuel runs short, and it is bitter cold, for Lisette is no longer there to hang

her cloak over the crazy casement, laughing at the whistle of the baffled wind.

Wyverne saw his uncle that night. The Squire was equally provoked and grieved; the intelligence took him completely by surprise, for he had never guessed that anything was going wrong; he would not allow at first that the engagement was irrevocably broken off, and wished to try what he could do to re-cement it; but Alan was so hopelessly firm on the point that Hubert was forced to yield. He believed in his nephew implicitly, and acquitted him of blame from first to last; but he was completely puzzled by Mrs. Lenox's strange conduct; he only dropped the subject when he saw how evidently it pained Alan to pursue it.


'I shall not write, even to reproach her,' the latter said. 'I am too heart-sick of her and her caprices. I suppose she will explain herself if we ever meet, and I have patience to listen.'

When they parted, the Squire clasped Wyverne's hand hard, looking wistfully into his face.

'I—I did my best, boy,' he said, huskily.

The old genial light came back for an instant, only an instant, into the other's weary eyes, and he returned the gripe right cordially.

'Do you think I don't know that?' he answered; 'or that I shall ever forget it? We all did our



best ; but Aunt Mildred has her way, after all. Take care of Helen ; she will need it. And if you would write soon to tell me the truth about her, it would be so very kind.'

The next morning Alan started for the North, alone. If the Christmas-tide was dreary at Wyverne Abbey, it was not a 'merry' one at Dene. The Squire did not seek to disguise his discontent, though he said little on the subject of the broken engagement, either to his wife or Helen. There was a gloomy reserve in his manner towards the former, that showed that he more than suspected her of unfair play ; to the latter he was unusually gentle and considerate. Miss Vavasour bore up bravely. No one looking at the girl's pale proud face would have dreamt of the dull, heavy pain coiled round her heart, like the serpent round Don Roderic in the tomb. She accepted her father's caresses gratefully, and her mother's with placid indifference. No words of recrimination had passed between those two ; but there is an instinct of distrust as well as of love or fear ; the last few days had slain sympathy outright, and even the tough sensibility of the cool diplomatist was not always unmoved as she realized the utter estrangement. So even 'my lady,' though the game was won, did not feel in vein for the festivities of the season. Her conscience had long

ceased to trouble her, when it was a question of expediency; she compassionated the sorrows of her misguided daughter about as much as a great surgeon does the sufferings of a patient who has just passed under his knife; but she was not quite philosopher enough wholly to disbelieve in Retribution. Her dreams of a brilliant future for Helen were sometimes disturbed by a vision of sad, earnest eyes, pleading only that truth might be met by truth—she had answered their appeal so well!

It was an odd sort of life that Wyverne led at the Abbey. He took to shooting over his broad manors with a dogged determination that rejoiced the hearts of his keepers and tenants and every one interested in the preservation of his game. He went out always early in the morning, and never returned till darkness set in; then he slept for a couple of hours, dined late, and sat smoking and musing far into the night. But it did him good in every way; the strong exercise and the keen north-country air stirred up the iron in his blood, and braced his nerves as well as his sinews. I believe that permanent melancholy implies a morbid condition, not only of the mind but the body. I believe—be it understood that this is only a theory, so far—that a man will not *mope* in the Queen's Bench, though he may hate himself occasionally, and find

the position irksome, if he sticks to cold water and rackets. The genial hopefulness which had resisted so many rude shocks, was dead in Alan for ever and aye; but it was not in his nature to become sullen or saturnine; he rejoiced simply and sincerely when his uncle's letter brought good news of Helen; he was not selfish enough to quarrel with his lost love because her wreath was not always ostentatiously twined of the willow. Some men are never satisfied unless they leave more than half the misery behind them.

Wyverne had been at the Abbey about a month, when he got a letter which surprised him not a little. Mr. Haldane wrote, to beg his nephew to visit him, for a single night, and pressed it on the ground that his health was failing.

Castle Dacre was situated far up in the hills, thirty miles or so from the Abbey. They had nicknamed it 'Castle Dangerous' through the countryside, for the roads all round it were so infamous as to be sometimes impassable. Very few, of late years, had found it worth their while to encounter such perils. It was a huge dreary pile—a tall grey keep in the centre, dating back to the time of the Danes—round this long low ranges of more modern buildings were grouped, all in the same pale gaunt granite. The trees clustering about the castle in clumps, and

thickly studded over the bleak park, hardly took away from the bare desolate effect; some of them were vast in the trunk and broad in the top, but it seemed as if the bitter north wind had checked their growth, though it could not waste their strength. You shivered involuntarily when you looked at the house from the outside; the contrast was the more striking when you entered. The whole of the interior was almost oppressively light and warm; great fires blazed in huge grates in the most unexpected corners, and bright lamps burned in the remotest nooks of passage, and hall, and corridor. A Belgravian establishment might have been maintained for a whole season at the cost of the coals and oil consumed in Dacre Castle; but such was the whim of its eccentric and autocratic master.

Alan Wyverne arrived very late, and did not see his uncle till they met at dinner. Mr. Haldane must always have been small and slight of frame; he was thin, now, to emaciation; there was not a particle of colour in the face or the delicate hands; the articulations in the last were so strongly marked as almost to spoil the perfection of their shape. His features might have been handsome once, and not disagreeable in their expression, but evil tempers and physical suffering had left ruinous traces there; the thin lips had forgotten how to smile, though

they were meaning enough when they curled sardonically ; he had a curious way of perpetually drawing himself together, as if struck with a sudden chill.

He was just the sort of man you would have set down as a great judge of pictures and collector of curiosities. So it was. The whole house was overflowing with the choicest productions of nature and art, gathered from every quarter of the known world. A long gallery was completely filled with the rarest specimens of china that the last three centuries could display. Some of our connoisseurs would have sold their souls for the plundering of that one chamber.

The dinner was simply perfection. You might have feasted for a whole season at half the best houses in London, and have missed the artistic effects which awaited you in that lonely castle of the far North. The wines of every sort were things to dream of. Mr. Haldane drank nothing but Burgundy. Even Alan Wyverne, accustomed as he was to witness deep wassail, felt wonder approaching to fear, as he saw his host drain glass after glass of the strong rich liquor without betraying a sign of its influence, either by the faintest flush on his thin parchment cheek, or a change of inflection in his low monotonous voice. It seemed as if he were

trying to infuse some warmth into his veins, in defiance of the curse laid upon him—to remain frozen and statuelike for ever.

While dinner lasted, the conversation went languishing on, never coming to a full stop, but never in the least animated. It was evident that the thoughts of both often wandered far away from the subject they were talking of. At last they drew their great arm-chairs up to the fire, one on each side of the horse-shoe table, with a perfect barricade of glass between them in the shape of decanters and claret-jugs. For the first ten minutes after they were left alone the host kept silence, leaning forward and spreading his hands over the fierce fire; they were so thin and white that the light seemed to pass through them as it does through transparent china. He raised his head suddenly and glanced aside at his companion, who was evidently musing, with an expression half inquisitive, half satirical, in his keen grey eyes.

‘So everything is at an end between you and Helen Vavasour. I am very glad of it, and not in the least surprised.’

It is never pleasant to have one’s reveries abruptly broken; the nerves are *agacés*, if nothing worse. Besides this, both words and manner grated on Alan’s sensibilities disagreeably. He did not fancy

those thin cynical lips pronouncing that name with such scant ceremony ; so his tone was anything but conciliatory.

‘Thank you. I don’t seem to care much about being congratulated, or condoled with, either ; and I cannot conceive what interest the subject can have for you. You ignored it pretty decisively some months ago. Perhaps you will be good enough to do so now.’

The look on his face, that had been simply listless before, grew hard and defiant while he was speaking. If Bernard Haldane was inclined to take offence, he certainly controlled his temper wonderfully. He filled a great glass to the brim with Chambertin, held it for a minute against the blaze, letting the light filter through the gorgeous purple, and drained it slowly before he replied—

‘I am not surprised at your engagement being broken off, because I know right well with whom you had to deal. I am glad, because I have always taken an interest in you, Alan. You don’t believe it ; but it is true, nevertheless ; and I do so still. I would sooner see a man I cared for, dead, than married to Mildred Vavasour’s daughter.’

Wyverne’s anger ceased, as soon as he saw that the old man had some reason, real or fancied, for his strange conduct ; but he spoke coldly still.

‘Strong words, sir. I suppose you have strong provocation to justify them?’

Bernard Haldane drew a folded letter from his breast-pocket, and put it into the other’s hand, silently. The paper was yellow with age, the ink faint and faded; but Alan knew the handwriting instantly. His astonishment deepened as he read on. Was it possible that his cool, calculating, diplomatic aunt could have penned such words as these — words in which passion seemed to live and vibrate still, untamed by passage through thirty years?

Mr. Haldane drained two glasses in rapid succession while the letter was reading. There was no thickness or hesitation in his voice when he spoke again, but it was hard and hoarse, as if his throat were dust-dry in spite of all the Burgundy.

‘That is her last letter—the last of forty or more. I have them all still, and I think I know them all by heart. You may laugh out if you like; I shall not be angry. She wrote once more—not a letter, only a note—to break all off, without a word of remorse for herself or pity for me. A fresh fancy or a better match came across her, so she turned me adrift like a dog she was tired of. She would have given me a dog’s death, too, if she could, I dare say; for, till she was married, she never felt safe. Do

you wonder now, or blame me, for what I have said and done or *not* done?’

Six weeks ago such a story as this would have won hearty sympathy from Alan Wyverne; but he had suffered too lately himself, to be moved by a tale of wrong thirty years old. He could not forget Bernard Haldane’s answer to his own letter, and the idea would haunt him that in some way or other it had materially affected his matrimonial prospects.

‘I neither wonder nor blame,’ he said, wearily. ‘If any one is right in visiting the sins of the mothers on the children, I suppose you were. . . Certainly, ‘my lady’ has a good deal to answer for. I understand her look now, when I mentioned your name. Yes, I *do* wonder at one thing. I don’t understand why you married my father’s sister.’

The old man glanced darkly at the speaker from under his strong grey eyebrows.

‘I hope my poor wife never knew the lie I uttered at the altar; or, if she did, that she forgave me before she died. But God knew it, and punished it. Alan—you are my nearest heir.’

After those significant words there was silence for some minutes, only broken by a faint tinkle and gurgle, as the host filled his glass repeatedly, and his guest followed the example in more moderate fashion. At last Mr. Haldane spoke again.

‘Alan, I wonder what would be your line, if you came into this inheritance? Do you know, it is larger than the one you threw away?’

A few weeks ago, when Wyverne’s fortunes were bound up with Helen Vavasour’s, such a speech as that would have sent a hot thrill of hope through all his being: he heard it now with an indifference which was not in the least assumed.

‘It would be a hazardous experiment,’ he answered, carelessly. ‘They say there is a great pleasure in hoarding, when you have more money than you know what to do with. I never tried it; perhaps I should take to avarice for a change. But I might take to playing again: it’s just as likely as not; and then everything would go, if my present luck lasted—the pictures, and the gems, and the china, and the mosaics. It would be a thousand pities, too; I don’t believe there’s such another collection in England.’

Bernard Haldane seemed determined, that night, not to be provoked by anything that his nephew could do or say. He was so accustomed to be surrounded by helpless dependents, bowing themselves without remonstrance or resistance before his tyrannical temper, that he had got weary of obsequiousness. Alan’s haughty *nonchalance*, though it evi-

dently proceeded from dislike or displeasure, rather refreshed the old cynic than otherwise.

‘You are honest, at all events,’ he muttered ; ‘it’s no use trying to bribe you into forgetting injuries ; if you *will* bear malice,—there’s an end of it. We wont speak of inheritances : they put unpleasant thoughts into a man’s head, whose health is breaking faster every day.’

Once more a shiver ran through the speaker’s emaciated frame, as it cowered and shrunk together ; and once more the thin white hands spread themselves eagerly to the blaze. After a pause he rose, evidently to go, and there was something actually approaching to cordiality in his manner.

‘It is hardly fair to ask you to stay on in this dreary place ; but it would please me very much if you would spare me a few days. They tell me the covers are full of game, and you can have a hundred beaters at half an hour’s notice. You will be nearly as much alone here as at the Abbey, for I never appear till dinner-time, and I go to bed very early, as you see. The Burgundy is a good sleeping-draught, but it must be humoured. You will stay over to-morrow, at least ? I am glad of that. Perhaps you would like to see the keeper ? Give any orders you please, not only about this, but about

anything you may fancy: I *can* answer for their being promptly obeyed. Good-night.'

His step, as he left the room, was slow and feeble; but not the slightest uncertainty or unsteadiness of gait gave token of the deep incessant draughts of fiery liquor that would long ago have dizzied any ordinary brain. Every family of ancient name, besides its statesmen and soldiers, preserves the moist memory of some bacchanalian Titan, whose exploits are inscribed on bowl, or tankard, or beaker. We may not doubt that there were giants in those days; but the prowess of the mightiest of all those stalwart squires would have been hardly tried, if he had 'drunk fair' that night with the little, wan, withered hypochondriac.

CHAPTER IV.

A WISE MAN IN THE EAST.

DAY succeeded day, and Alan Wyverne still lingered at Dacre Castle. He could hardly have told you what kept him there. The shooting certainly was a great attraction, for, though the season closed in the first week of his stay, there were snipe and wild-fowl enough to have found work for half a dozen guns ; but it was not the only one. The truth was, that a sort of liking had sprung up between the cynical host and his quiet guest. No amount of deep drinking could warm Bernard Haldane into an approach to conviviality ; but his morose, moody temper decidedly softened during the few hours that he spent each evening in Alan's society. There was no sympathy perhaps, strictly speaking, between these two, but there was a certain affinity of suffering. The same soft white hand had stricken them both sorely, though one wound was yet green, and the other had been rankling more than a score of years. After that first night, neither made the

faintest allusion to the subject ; but ever and anon, when they were talking about pictures or other things in which both took an interest, the conversation would drop suddenly, and a silence would ensue as if by mutual consent ; then, each felt conscious that his companion's thoughts were wandering in the same direction as his own, and with equal bitterness. After a few minutes you might have seen each break from his reverie, with the same half angry impatience, as if despising himself for the weakness of such idle musing, knowing all the while that the return of the dreaming-fit was as much a certainty and a question of hours as the rising of the morrow's sun.

Wyverne's visit would probably have been still further prolonged, if an invitation had not come one morning, suiting his present humour so exactly, that he accepted it without a moment's hesitation. An old comrade of Alan's was on the point of starting in his yacht for a roving cruise round the shores of Greece and Syria, with an intention of penetrating as far as the hunting-grounds that lie westward of the lower spurs of the Caucasus : indeed, there was a charming indefiniteness about the whole thing ; the limits of their wanderings and the time of their return were to depend entirely on circumstances and the fancy of the travellers. Raymond Graham had

heard of his friend's late disappointment, though he made no allusion to it in his letter, only enlarging on the sporting prospects of the expedition and the attractions of a very pleasant party. He thought it would be just the proposal to tempt Wyverne, and he guessed right.

None of the new-fashioned remedies beat some of the old ones, after all. Change of climate and change of scene enable the sufferer to make a stand against sickness of mind or body just as effectually as they did four thousand years ago.

Hot blinding tears stream down Dido's stricken face as she steals on board her galley in the harbour of Tyre ; for nights she will not close her heavy eyes, lest a dead man should stand by her couch pointing to the gash of Pygmalion's dagger ; the boldest of her true friends and leal vassals dares not trouble with a word of comfort that great hopeless sorrow. But see—the headlands of Cyprus are yet blue in the leeward distance, and the rich blood has begun to colour the pale cheek again ; when the dark lashes lift, men see that the divine light is not quenched in the glorious eyes ; nay, the sweet lips do not dissemble a faint, sad smile as she hears Bitias boasting loud of the bride he will win before sundown. Of a truth, I think the fair Queen's dreams will cease to be spectre-haunted, before

her prow touches ground in the sands of Bagradas.

They are more definite now as to the seasons of donning and doffing their weeds, and will not set their tresses free a day too soon ; but, O Benedict, my friend, are you sanguine enough to believe that so long a voyage would be needed, to replace despairing grief by decorous woe, in the desolate bosom of your widow, or mine ?

Remember, we have been speaking of creatures, many of whom must find a certain pleasure in a mild languid melancholy. ‘ They would not, if they could, be gay.’ Wyverne’s temperament, though it contained womanlike elements of gentleness and tenderness, was essentially masculine. He was, indeed, stouter of heart and stronger in will than most of the rough-and-ready Stryver sort, who cannot argue without blustering or advise without bullying ; who, neither in love nor war, ever lay aside the speaking-trumpet. The battle of life had gone hard against him of late ; but he did not therefore conclude that there was nothing left worth living for. The example just then before his eyes was not without a significant warning. Alan felt that absence from England would suit him best for a while ; but he had no idea of banishing himself indefinitely. The proposed expedition would have

tempted him at any period of his life, and he looked forward to it now with a real interest and an honest determination to make the best of everything.

Bernard Haldane did not attempt to alter his nephew's purpose ; indeed, he approved of it thoroughly ; but he sat much later than usual on the last evening, and seemed loth to say good-bye.

‘If I am alive when you return, you will come here, I hope,’ he said, at last. ‘If I am gone, I am sure, you will, for good reasons. Your programme promises well—so well that it would be a pity not to carry it out thoroughly. Don’t let money stop you. Where you have to deal with semi-barbarians, it’s often a mere question between silver and steel ; the first saves an infinity of trouble, and, I think, it’s the most moral argument of the two. So take my advice, and bribe Sheikhs and chiefs to any extent. I have written to-day to my bankers, to give you unlimited credit there. Now, don’t annoy me by making objections. You know perfectly well that *I* sacrifice nothing. If I did, my generosity would still begin very late—too late, I fear. It would be the falsest delicacy if you were to refuse ; for, though we have been almost strangers hitherto, through my fault, Alan—you *are* my nephew, after all.’

He laid his hand gently, almost timidly, on

Wyverne's as he finished speaking, and the thin white fingers quivered with his nervous eagerness, though they remained always deadly cold.


It must be a very mortifying and humiliating time when an old man, who has started in life with exceptional advantages of intellect and fortune, is compelled to admit the probability of the whole thing having been a mistake from first to last ; unless there is some grievous sin to be acknowledged and repented of, I think it would be more satisfactory to go blundering on unconsciously to the end. To such a frame of mind Mr. Haldane had been coming gradually for days past. He quite realized the fact that, in default of a son, he would have chosen Wyverne out of all England as the heir to his broad lands and great possessions. He knew enough of Alan's character to feel sure that no more than common kindness in earlier days would have been needed to win his affection and keep it ; but he had held him at arm's length with the rest till it was too late to do anything better than change dislike into indifference. For thirty years he had sat alone, 'nursing his wrath to keep it warm,' fancying that he could make the many suffer for the crime of one. He had succeeded perhaps in discomfiting a few miserable dependents, and in disappointing or disgusting a few relatives and friends ; but he had

never ruffled a rose-leaf in the couch of the fair 'enemy who did him that dishonour.' Who had been the real sufferer, after all? The unhappy misanthrope almost gnashed his teeth as he answered the question, and acknowledged the childish impotence of his rancour. If he had only had the courage at first, to look his wrongs and griefs fairly in the face, they might have been easily kept at bay ; it was too late to strive for the mastery when they had become a part of his morbid being. He saw all this clearly enough now. The old, old story—theory perfected, when to work it out is physically impossible—the alchemist just grasping the Great Arcanum, without a stiver left to buy powder for the crucible or coal for the furnace.

Nevertheless, that inveterate habit of looking at things *au noir* rather misled Bernard Haldane as to the state of Wyverne's feelings. It would be too much to say that he had begun to conceive a real affection for his uncle ; but he was not insensible to the change in the latter's demeanour. He felt that the old man was trying, after his fashion, to make some amends for the past, and rather reproached himself for not having met such advances more cordially. Day by day the wall built up between them had been crumbling, and this last act of generosity made the breach quite practicable. An

orthodox hero would, of course, have taken the 'pale and haughty' line, and have rejected the golden olive-branch, preferring sublime independence to late obligation. Alan was much more practical and prosaic in his ideas; he accepted without hesitation, and did not scruple to express his gratitude warmly, though not demonstratively. It is needless to say that he did not intend to work the *carte blanche* unreasonably hard. So those two parted, in all amity. Bernard Haldane knew that he would be alone again on the morrow, and that in all probability he saw his nephew's face for the last time; but he drank less and slept better, that night, than he had done for years.

Wyverne wrote to tell Hubert Vavasour of his plans as soon as they were fixed. He got a very characteristic answer, full of kind wishes and prophecies of great success to the expedition. In truth, the Squire rather envied any one who at that juncture could get well clear of England, home, and beauty. He spoke cheerfully about Helen, but his hopes for her seemed about the brightest of his domestic prospects. Evidently he thought that the crash could not be much longer averted, and that the close of the current year would find wrack and ruin at Dene. None the less, from the bottom of his honest heart, he wished his nephew good-speed.



A fortnight later, strong healthy excitement tingled in Alan's veins, as he stood on a wet sloping deck, his arm coiled through the weather-rigging, and looked ahead, through spray driving thick and blindly, over a turmoil of black foam-flecked water, betting with himself as to when the next sea would come tumbling in-board. The *Goshawk* was a stout schooner, measuring two hundred liberal tons; there was no handier or honester craft in all the Royal squadron; but she had to do all she knew that afternoon, fighting her way foot by foot and tack by tack against a boisterous south-wester, with Cape Finisterre frowning on her lee. We have not to follow in the track of the outward-bound; our business is, now, with the girls they have left behind them.

CHAPTER V.

A STAR IN THE WEST.

THE season opened early, and promised brilliantly. There was an unusually good entry of 'maidens;' but among these one held easily, from the first, an undisputed pre-eminence. They would have made a favourite even of a *protégée* of Lady Mildred Vavasour's; you may guess what *prestige* attached to her only daughter. In truth, the demoiselle could have won upon her merits; before that first drawing-room when, it was said, Royal eyes lighted upon her kindly and admiringly, the triumph was secured. Such a success had not been achieved within the memory of the oldest inhabitant of White's. Hardly any one had heard of her brief engagement, and those who did know, only looked upon it as a childish, *cousinly* folly, entailing no serious consequences. Certainly, there was nothing in Helen's demeanour suggestive of regret or repining. Most people would have laughed incredulously, if they had been told that the superb head, which

carried itself so imperially, had ever been bowed down hopelessly and helplessly, or that the lustre of the glorious eyes had ever been drowned in miserably unavailing tears. She seemed generally in good spirits, but they were not equable; her humour was cruelly capricious, and it was impossible to calculate upon her temper; she would be dangerously captivating one evening, and, the next morning, absolutely inaccessible. They very soon found out that she would sometimes be moved to serious anger on absurdly slight pretexts, or—none at all.

To speak the truth, Miss Vavasour was by no means insensible to the admiration she commanded, and appreciated homage thoroughly. It was very pleasant to keep the best men in town *en faction* near the Statue, looking eagerly for her appearance in Rotten-row; and to know, at a ball, that her rivals were waiting with blank tablets, till her own was filled up to the cotillon. She was strictly impartial at first, and the sharpest eyes could not detect the shadow of a preference; she made it a rule not to indulge the best of her partners with more than his one regular turn. There was surprise, if not scandal, throughout Babylon, when Bertie Grenvil engrossed her almost entirely on a certain evening. The Cherub was not disposed to under-

value his advantages of any sort; so he never confided to the world that he had received in the morning a long letter from Alan Wyverne, and had discussed it with Helen, line by line.

Almost all our old acquaintances are in town. Max Vavasour has returned from Northern Italy, where some mysterious attraction had detained him since last November, and signalizes himself by an exemplary attention to his domestic duties; he sacrifices readily all the early part of his evenings whenever 'my lady' requires his attendance, and breaks his morning sleep, without a murmur, to chaperon his sister in her rides. Such virtue deserves to be rewarded; and it is possible that Max sees the glitter of a rich compensation not far off in futurity. There is Maud Brabazon, you see—more perilously provocative than ever; her coquetry seems to have blossomed with the spring flowers; she is still disporting herself mischievously with Bertie Grenvil's facile affections, who has not gained a foot of ground since we left them at Dene. The Cherub begins to acknowledge that he is getting very much the worst of it; but finds, apparently, a certain satisfaction in the maltreatment, and submits to cruelty and caprice with an uncomplaining docility worthy of a better fate and a better cause. Harding Knowles, too, has opened the campaign with unusual

prodigality and splendour; he rides the neatest of hacks, is profusely hospitable in luncheons at his chambers and suburban dinners, and speaks—always with bated breath and in the strictest *tête-à-tête*—familiarily of ‘Clydesdale.’ He is to be seen at all Lady Mildred’s parties, who treats him with marked consideration; but he keeps clear of her daughter, for the recollection of that discomfiture at Dene still rankles bitterly.

Before long, diffidence and despondency showed themselves in the circle of Miss Vavasour’s assiduous admirers; the Detrimentials drew back in fear and trembling, and even the best of the Eligibles stood aloof, for a season, watching how things would go. The Great Earl had come to the front, evidently in serious earnest.

Such reserve is, surely, most just and natural. Shall we be ruder than the lower animals, who by their example teach us a proper respect of persons?

See—a company of beautiful bright-eyed antelopes are drinking at their favourite pool, deep in the green heart of the jungle; the leopards have tracked them, and steal nearer and nearer, till a few seconds more will bring the prey within clutch of their spring: suddenly the ravenous beasts cease to trail themselves forward, crouching lower and lower till

their muzzles seem buried in the ground : there they lie, rigid and motionless, showing no sign of life, even by a quiver of the listening ear : the sounds close by are significant enough to *them*, though the poor little antelopes hear nothing—a soft, heavy footfall—a deep breath drawn long and savagely—a smothered rustle, as though some huge body were forcing stealthy passage through the tangled jungle-grass : the leopards know, right well, that the King of the Forest is at hand, and famished as they are, will not betray their presence even by a growl, till their Seigneur shall have chosen his victim and satiated his appetite. Could the most patient and discreet of courtiers or parasites act more decorously ?

The simile is not altogether inapposite, I fancy, nor very new either : nevertheless, O fairest reader ! I *do* pray you to pardon the truculence of that carnivorous comparison.

Clydesdale did not seek to dissemble his admiration ; indeed, he seemed desirous to *afficher* it as much as possible, for he knew that it was the surest way of keeping the ground clear, and that was precisely what he wanted. If it had been possible he would have liked, when he was calling in Guelph-crescent, to have left some visible token of his presence outside, to warn off the vulgar and profane,

even as the Scythian chiefs used to plant their spear at the door of the tent wherein dwelt the favourite of the hour. From the moment that he heard, with a fierce throb of exultation, of the breaking off of Helen's engagement, the Earl had made up his resolve, and never doubted as to the event. Alan's departure made him still more confident; he felt that the last barrier had been taken away: he had nothing to do now but to sit still and win. He was doggedly obstinate in his attentions, yet by no means demonstrative; he seldom tried to secure more than two of Miss Vavasour's waltzes in an evening, but these were the only ones in which he deigned to exhibit himself; when she was dancing with any one else, he would stand watching her swift graceful movements, with a critical complacency on his broad sensual face, that was enough to aggravate even an indifferent spectator—the conscious pride of proprietorship was so very evident. With just that same expression, the chief of a great stable watches the Oaks favourite as she sweeps past him, leading the string of two-year-olds—so easily—with her long sweeping stride. Lord Clydesdale was always sparing of his conversational treasures, if he possessed any; nor did he lavish them even on the woman whom he delighted to honour. His eyes ought to have been more expressive, for they had a

good deal of duty to do; his pertinacious gaze scarcely left Helen's face when he was in her presence, and he seemed to consider this homage quite sufficiently expressive, without translating it verbally. Riding by her rein in Rotten-row, lounging in Lady Mildred's drawing-room for hours of an afternoon,—the moody suitor was always the same silent, sulky, self-satisfied statue of Plutus. If the real truth had been known, I believe he would have preferred doing all the wooing by proxy.

No amount of coldness on Miss Vavasour's part would have checked the Earl in his obstinate determination to win her; but it must be confessed that he did not meet with much discouragement.

If a purely conventional marriage had been proposed to Helen, some months ago, she would probably have rejected it with much indignation and scorn; but things were altered now. Women, as well as men, turn readily to ambition—never so readily as when love has just been rudely thwarted—and the demoiselle, though proud as Lucifer, was not too proud to be ambitious. The little she had seen of her admirer had not impressed her very favourably; but no active dislike was working the other way. She knew how eagerly matrons and maidens had striven and schemed to attain the Clydesdale coronet—it was, in truth, better worth

wearing than some Grand Ducal crowns—there was a certain triumph in the consciousness that she had only to stretch out her little hand to place it on her brows.

‘There’s nothing like competition,’ they say ; the maxim holds good in other things besides commerce and Civil Service examinations. I believe that there is hardly any folly, short of sin—let us be generous, and make that possible exception—to which a woman may not be tempted, if she is once thoroughly imbued with the spirit of rivalry. There is no end to the absurdities they will commit, when this emulous devil possesses them. I have seen a most excellent young person, ordinarily a model of demure propriety, attempt to vault over high timber and come thereat to grief absolutely unutterable, sooner than be beaten by a companion better versed in gymnastics, who had just performed the feat safely and gracefully amidst general applause. I have known a fair dame—maturer, it is true, in attractions than in years—utterly ignore her habitual prudence, and compromise herself gravely by waltzing thrice almost consecutively with the same partner, simply because she alone could induce that languid hussar to break an anti-terpsichorean pledge which he had entered into for no earthly reason but laziness ; yet, on her purity of principle and honesty of intention I would

peril the residue of my life—or, what is more to the purpose—of my patrimony.

The Apple may be crude or withered, and scarcely worth the plucking ; but if the fatal legend be once visible on its rind, you will see divine eyes glitter with something more than eagerness ; and even chaste, cold Pallas may not repress a jealous pang, when the prize is laid in Aphrodite's rosy palm.

If it had been a question of keeping faith with Alan Wyverne, Miss Vavasour would not have wasted one thought or one regret on the present triumph or the splendid future ; but knowing that they were separated for ever and ever, she was inclined to try if 'the pomps and vanities of this wicked world' could not make some amends for what she had lost. She would not suppose it possible that a new affection could ever replace the passionate love that had been crushed and thwarted, but which would not die. There was her great mistake. It is in our early years that we ought to be patient ; but we never recognise this till we are old : we hope while we are young, but we will not wait. So Helen accepted Clydesdale's saturnine devotion, on the whole rather graciously ; her haughty, wayward temper, which would break out at times, rather attracted than repelled him.

It soon began to be noised abroad that the Great Fish was firmly hooked, if not landed. Certain astute chaperons acknowledged, with a sigh, that it was time to desist from a futile pursuit, and to seek humbler and more available victims. Dudley Delamere, the Earl's heir presumptive, who had nourished wild hopes of succession, on the strength of his cousin's notorious habits of self-indulgence, came down to the Foreign Office, two mornings running, with whiskers uncurled, thereby intimating prostration and despair as plainly as if he had rent his perfect garments, or scattered ashes on his comely head.

'I wont fight any longer,' he said, plaintively; 'the luck's too dead against me. Throw up the sponge; the Begum has won it fairly.'


Those profligates were wont thus irreverently to designate a certain elderly Indian widow—very stout, good humoured, and dark complexioned, with rather more thousands in the funds than she had years on her head—who, for the last two seasons, had manifested an unrequited attachment to the ungrateful but not unconscious Delamere. It must have been the attraction of contraries that made her bow down so helplessly before that slim, golden-haired Irresistible. He rather avoided her than otherwise; made a merit of coming to her artistic dinners, and

treated her, when they met, with cruelly cold courtesy ; but the impassioned Eurasian still kept hoping and worshipping on ; pursuing the reluctant Adonis with pertinacious blandishments, with broad benevolent smiles that terrified him inexpressibly, and with glances out of her great black eyes that sent a shiver through his sensitive organization. Patient fidelity was rewarded at last. When Dudley had once made up his mind to the dire necessity, he accepted the position in a manly and Christian-like spirit, and sacrificed himself for the benefit of his country and his creditors, with a calm chivalrous bravery worthy of Regulus or—Smith O'Brien. They say it is a very comfortable *ménage*, on the whole ; certainly, the Begum's smiles are more oppressively radiant than ever, and I should think she had gained about two stone in weight, since the day that crowned her constancy as it deserved.

Nevertheless, though Lord Clydesdale's attentions were so marked, and his intentions so evident, the season ended without his coming to the point of a formal proposal. It would be rather hard to define his reasons for the delay. Possibly, holding the game in his hand, he chose to dally over his triumph, and play it out to the last card. Possibly, too, when a man's bachelor-life comprises every element of comfort and luxury, he lingers with a fond reluc-

tance over its close. Besides this, the Earl appreciated the advantages of his position thoroughly ; it pleased him to be the centre-point at which the machinations of mothers and the fascinations of marriageable virgins were levelled ; he had observed of late—not without regret—a manifest slackening in these assiduities, and, vain as he was, he felt that it would be rather unsafe to rely on his personal attractions for securing such pleasant homage, after his future was once decided irrevocably. Absolutely unalloyed selfishness will make even the dullest of intellects calculating and crafty. But Clydesdale did not vacillate in his set purpose for an instant. His last words, both to Lady Mildred and her daughter, before he left town for Scotland, were perfectly significant and satisfactory.

‘ My lady ’ had shown herself throughout worthy of her fame as a consummate tactician. The cunning mediciner was always at hand to give aid if aid was required, but she was far too wise to interfere with Nature, when it was working favourably. She guessed aright as to the state of her daughter’s feelings ; she could understand how bitter memories were perpetually conflicting with ambitious hopes in the poor child’s troubled breast ; but she knew that a certain order and harmony must inevitably succeed, ere long, the chaos and discord ; so she waited



for the event in quiet confidence, without irritating Helen by consolation, or advice, or surmises. With Clydesdale, Lady Mildred was equally cautious and reserved; she was always charmed to receive him, of course, and ready to accept his attendance; but her bitterest enemy could not have accused her of betraying any undue eagerness to attract or to monopolize it. The accomplished dissembler could afford to despise affectation; when the Earl's marked attentions showed that he was thoroughly in earnest, she did not pretend unconsciousness, but accepted them with a composed courtesy, as if such homage was only her daughter's due. She bore herself somewhat like a monarch of olden days, receiving the fealty of a mighty vassal—evidently gratified by the tribute, yet by no means overpowered by the honour. She did not attempt to conceal her approval, but she would not derogate from her position one step; she was ready to conciliate, not to concede. The suitor soon understood that his position did not entitle him to follow his own fashion of wooing, or to dictate his own terms; he could not claim a single privilege that had not been granted from time immemorial to such as were worthy to aspire to a Vavasour of Dene. Do not suppose that 'my lady's' demeanour ever expressed this too plainly; dignified stiffness or majestic con-

descension were utterly out of her line ; her manner never lost the gentle caressing languor which made it so charming. The tacit way in which the understanding was established, showed the perfection of the art. The engine would not have been complete if soft quilted velvet had not masked the steel springs so thoroughly.

Lady Mildred was not in the least vexed or disappointed when Clydesdale left town without bringing matters actually to a crisis. She knew right well it was the simplest question of time. When the Earl spoke, rather eagerly, about meeting the Vava-sours again very soon, she only replied ' that she hoped they might do so ; but that her own summer arrangements were scarcely fixed yet. They would be at Dene in the autumn, certainly, and would be very happy to see him, if he could spare them a week in the shooting season.'

Her coolness quite disconcerted Clydesdale ; he bit his lip, and looked for a moment as if he were going to be angry ; but he checked himself in time, only giving ' my lady ' a look before he went, that, if she had been at all disquieted, would have set her mind effectually at rest.

It is rather an humiliating confession to make about one's Prima Donna—but, I am afraid, Helen was really more disconcerted than her mother at

the abeyance in which affairs just then remained. It is not certain if she had made up her mind to accept Lord Clydesdale at once ; but it *is* certain that she would have liked to have had the option of refusing him. In truth there were other disagreeable incidents, besides a passing mortification of vanity. Miss Vavasour's marvellous beauty had not in anywise palled upon public admiration ; men gathered round her, wherever she appeared, just as eagerly as at the beginning of the season, and the candidates for inscription on her card were numerous and emulous as ever ; but there was a marked reserve and reticence in their homage. When a damsel is once assigned, by general consent, to a high and puissant seignior, even though no contract shall have been signed, a certain wall of observance is built up around her, that few care seriously to transgress, except those incorrigible reprobates who make a mock at all social and conventional obligations, and never see a fence without wanting to 'lark' over it. Perhaps it *is* rather aggravating, to be obliged to conform to all the constraints of affiancement without having so far reaped its solid advantages.

I am well aware that poor Helen's market-value as a heroine will have gone down about fifty per cent. in this chapter. But what would you have ?

The ancient answer to the question—‘What does Woman most care for?—holds good still. We can solve the riddle, now, without the Fairy’s help, affirming boldly that it is—Power.

CHAPTER VI.

HOW WOLVES AND FOXES DIE.

ONE of our characters need trouble us no more. The summer passed, and autumn came on quickly; but Bernard Haldane never saw the leaves change. Life had been flickering within him, fitfully, for some time past; it went out suddenly at last; the mortal sickness did not endure through forty-eight hours. He betrayed no fear or impatience when he heard that his end was approaching rapidly; only muttering under his breath—‘There is time enough for all I have to do.’ He paid no sort of attention to the remonstrances of the physician, but caused himself to be carried at once into his library, where he remained locked in for nearly two hours, with a servant whom he could trust thoroughly. Paper after paper was examined and burnt—a packet of yellow faded letters, first of all; and Mr. Haldane retained throughout a perfect intelligence and self-possession. He leant back in his chair when all was done, and closed his eyes with a sigh of satis-

faction, but roused himself from the stupor that was creeping over him, to write, with great difficulty, a few lines to Alan Wyverne; the signature was scarcely legible, and as he was trying to direct the envelope, his head fell forward heavily on the table. When they got him back to his room, he was almost too weak to speak, though he rallied somewhat after taking strong restoratives.

The rector of the parish—a meek, single-minded, conscientious man—thought it his duty to offer what comfort and succour he could, though he feared the case was nearly desperate. What doubts, and misgivings, and repinings entered into the system of Bernard Haldane's dark cynical philosophy, God only can tell; he never tried to make a proselyte. As regards any communion with the Church, or outward observance of her ceremonies, he might have been the veriest of infidels; but he had never shown himself her overt antagonist. He listened now to all that the priest had to say, quite patiently and courteously, but with an indifference painfully evident. When asked, 'if he repented?' he answered, 'Yes, of many things.' Then came the question, 'Are you in peace and charity with all the world?' No word of reply passed the firm white lips, but they curled with a terribly bitter smile; and the skeleton hand that lay on the coverlet

was clenched, as though the long filbert nails would pierce its palm.

The good rector felt utterly disheartened; he had not nerve enough to cope with that intractable penitent; it would have been a simple mockery to speak of a Sacrament, then; so he did the best he could—praying long and fervently, even against hope, for the troubled soul that was so near its rest. The sick man lay quite still, watching the movements of the priest, at first with mere curiosity, soon with a growing interest; at last it seemed as if his eyes would fain have thanked the kindly intercessor; but they waxed dimmer every moment, till the heavy lids closed slowly and wearily, not to be lifted again.

The physician standing by bent down his ear to the lips that still kept moving. He caught one word—'Mildred'—and some other syllables absolutely unintelligible. The frown on the brow and the contraction of the features, just then, surely did not come from pain. So—murmuring a farewell, that savoured, I fear, rather of ban than blessing—died Bernard Haldane—more tranquilly and serenely than saints and martyrs have died, who bore uncomplainingly all the burden and heat, and shrank from no self-sacrifice that could benefit their kind.

The bitter face changed and softened strangely,

they say, before the corpse was cold, till it settled into intense sadness, and ten years seemed taken from the dead man's age. That grave, pensive expression perhaps was a natural one, before the keen morbid sensibility was so cruelly warped and withered. It may be that he *did* repent heartily at last, though he could not forgive; thinking of the poverty all round him that he had never stretched a hand to help, of the honest affection that he may have barred out when he shut himself up in his arid misanthropy. If he did once thoroughly realize this, and his utter impotence to make any amends, be sure the latest pang of his life was the sharpest of all. That is the worst of all philosophy—Epicurean or Stoic, seductive or repellant; it *will* often fail just at the critical time of trial. The tough, self-reliant character, that meets misfortune savagely and defiantly like a personal foe, holds its own well for a while; but, if there be not Faith enough to teach humble, hopeful endurance, I think it fares best in the end with the hearts that are only—broken.

Mr. Haldane's will was very brief, though perfectly explicit and formal. Every one who had ever suffered from his temper or caprices found themselves overpaid beyond their wildest expectations. These legacies excepted, he left all that he possessed, without fetter or condition, to his nephew.

There was great exultation among the many who knew and loved Alan Wyverne well, when they heard of his goodly heritage. Bertie Grenvil, on guard at the Palace on the Sunday when the news came to town, called his intimates around him to rejoice over the 'pieces of silver' that his friend had found, and presided at a repast such as Brillat-Savarin might have ordered if he had served in the Household Brigade. Algy Beauclerc lost heavily at the club that night, for he was tied, after the Mezentian fashion, to a partner who never played the right card even by accident; but he laughed a great honest laugh, and told the incorrigible sinner, when the penance was over, that 'he would make a very fair player in time, if he would only sit still and take pains.' The Squire appeared at dinner radiant and triumphant, as if there were no such things as mortgages or Jews on this side of eternity. Lady Mildred looked delighted and vaguely sympathetic, as if she would have liked to congratulate *some one* on the spot, but did not quite see her way. Helen Vavasour's cheek flushed for an instant and then grew very pale; her lip trembled painfully, as she whispered to herself, 'Too late—ah me! too late!'

The *Goshawk* was lying off Beyrout when 'the good news from home' came out. Wyverne received

them with a placidity approaching to indifference, which exasperated his companions intensely ; but he left the party immediately, and returned alone by the next steamer. When he landed in England, he went straight to Castle Dacre. The first paper that he opened was Bernard Haldane's letter. It ran thus :

‘ MY DEAR ALAN,—I wish I could have seen you once more, though I have little to say besides farewell. Think as kindly of me as you can ; but don't try to persuade yourself, or others, that you are sorry I am gone. I leave no chief mourner. If a dog howls here to-night, it will be because the moon is full. It is but common justice that we should reap as we have sown ; nevertheless, these last hours are rather dreary. I have left everything undone that I ought to have done for thirty years and more, but I have tried to make amends—at least to you. You are young enough to enjoy this second inheritance thoroughly, and wiser than when you lost your own. I will not attach to my bequest even the shadow of an implied condition ; yet I pray you to keep the old house and its contents together as long as you can. You said yourself it would be a pity to part them. I would leave you my blessing if I dared ; but it would be a sorry jest, and might

turn out badly. I do wish you all the good luck that can be found in this mismanaged world. I wish it—even if you persuade her mother to allow Helen Vavasour to share your altered fortunes. I am too tired to write more. It has been a long, rough journey, and I ought to sleep soundly. Good night.

Yours, in all kindness,

BERNARD HALDANE.'

It would be absurd to say that Wyverne felt deep sorrow for his uncle's death; but an intense pity welled up in his honest heart as he read that strange letter, and fancied the lonely old man tasking the last of his strength to trace the weak wavering lines; in truth, the characters seemed still more hazy and indistinct, when he laid the paper down.

By my faith—it is somewhat early in the day to become funereal. Let us pass over two or three months and change the *venue* entirely.

It is a soft grey December morning, with a good steady breeze, cool but not chilly. The Grace-Dieu hounds are about to draw Rylstone Gorse for the first time this season. It is a favourite fixture, and no wonder—sufficiently central to let the best men in of two neighbouring packs, yet sufficiently remote from town and rail to keep the profane and un-

initiate away. There is a brook, too, in the bottom, over which the fox is sure to go, not very wide, but deep enough to hold a regiment, which always weeds the field charmingly. The meet is in a big pasture hard by: while the ten minutes' law allotted by immemorial courtesy to distant comers is expiring, it may be worth while to mark a few of the 'notables.'

There, leaning over the low carriage-door, and doing the honours of the meet to Lady Mildred, stands the Duke of Camelot. There is nothing of *morgue* or reserve in the character or demeanour of that mighty noble, but his manner is, in despite of himself, somewhat superb and stately. Wherever he appears, there is diffused around an ambrosial atmosphere savouring of the *ancien régime*. Nature never meant him for a warrior or statesman. His mission through life has been to *poser* before the world, unconsciously, as a perfect type of his order; you see it in every movement of the long taper limbs, in the carriage of the patrician head, in the peculiar sweep and curl of the ample grey whisker, in every line of the clear-cut prominent features, in the smile which—intended to be genial and benevolent—is simply condescending and benign. What his mental capacities may be, it is impossible to say; he has never tried them. But in his own country

he hath great honour; the peasantry believe him to be omniscient and omnipotent, if not omnipresent. Were the fancy to seize him to rebel against the powers that be, I fancy the stalwart yeomen would muster strong round the ancient banner, in defiance of the claims of Stuart or Guelph. Nevertheless, the Duke is, on the whole, a very good-natured and convivial potentate; when no state-party is in question, he loves to gather round him pleasant people who suit each other and suit him, without regard to their pride of place or order of precedence. He brings, in one way or another, more than twenty guests to the meet to-day, including, besides the family from Dene, the Brabazons and Lord Clydesdale.

The Master has just fallen to the rear, after a brief conference with the huntsman. He sits there, you see, with a listless indifference on his dark handsome face, as if henceforth he had no earthly interest in the proceedings; but in reality he is watching everything and everybody with keen, inevitable eyes. Lord Roncesvaux is a cold, stern man, born with tact and talent enough to have made him great in his generation, if he had not devoted both exclusively, together with half his fortune, to the one favourite pursuit. He speaks seldom in society—never in the senate; but if a thrusting rider

gets a step too forward at the gorse, or presses on his hounds to-day, you will hear that well-shaped mouth open very much to the purpose.

A little to the left, with a clear space round him, is Clydesdale, looking hot and savage, even this early hour. The horse would be quiet enough if the rider would only let his mouth alone; but the Earl has a knack of bullying his dependents, equine as well as human; so 'Santiago's' temper is getting fast exasperated, and his broad brown chest is already flecked with foam.

Do you mark that lithe erect figure, on the wicked-looking bay mare, moving from one group to another in the foreground? Everybody seems glad to see him, and he has a jest or a smile ready for each successive greeting. That is Major Cosmo Considine, who began life as a Guardsman, and has served since in more Irregular corps than he now chooses to remember. The habitual expression of the face is gay and pleasant enough, but sometimes the features look strangely haggard and worn, as if the past was trying to tell its tale; and the thin lips, under cover of the huge blonde moustache, will set, as though in anger or pain. Redoubtable in battle—dangerous, they say, in a boudoir—he is especially hard to beat when hounds are running straight and fast; no matter how big the fencing may be, if it is a real

good thing, Satanella's lean eager head will be seen creeping to the front; and once there, like her master on certain other occasions, she is 'not to be denied.'

Major Considine married a wife, wealthy and fair, some three years ago, and has ever since been purposing, gravely but vaguely, to become steady and respectable. The pious intentions have not been carried out with uniform success. The weak mind of his unhappy spouse is supposed to oscillate almost daily between furious jealousy and helpless adoration; but the silver tongue of the incorrigible Bohemian is still seductive as when, in spite of relatives' advice and warning, it won him his bride; about twenty minutes' persuasion always reduces her to the dreamy, devotional phase, in which she remains till the next offence awakes her. To do Cosmo justice, his aberrations are much more harmless than the world gives him credit for; nor does he often seek now to illustrate his theories practically.

There is Nick Gunstone, the great stock-breeder and steeple-chaser, expatiating to a knot of true believers on the merits of a long, low, raking five-year-old, with whom he expects to pull off a good thing before next April. The young one looks wild and scared and fretful, and evidently knows little of his business yet; but his rider has nerve enough for

both, and a hand as light as a woman's, though his muscles are like steel. When the hounds are well away you will see the pair sailing along in front, quite at their ease: a 'crumpler' or so is a moral certainty; but Nick Gunstone is all wire and whale-bone, and seems to rebound harmlessly from the earth, if he hits it ever so hard; he believes religiously that 'nothing steadies a young one like a heavy fall, on which principle he generally sends them at the strongest part of the fence, and the stiffest bit of the timber. He is in rather a bad humour to-day, for objections have just been made and sustained to his receiving the aristocratic 'allowance' in future; and Mr. Gunstone's sensitive soul chafes indignantly at the injustice—of course on account of the diminution of his dignity, not in the least because of the addition to his weight!

The Amazonian division muster in great force, displaying every variety of head-gear, coquettish and business-like. There is one of the number—far in the background, with a solitary attendant—that even a stranger would single out instantly, but with an instinctive feeling that his glance ought not to rest there long. To be sure, her horse is well worth looking at; for if shape and 'manners' go for anything, Don Juan must be a very cheap three hundred guineas' worth. But the rider's appearance is still

more remarkable. It would be rather difficult to define exactly why. There is nothing particularly eccentric or 'fast' in her demeanour, so far as one can judge while she is in repose; her equipment and appointments, though faultless in every respect, are perfectly quiet and unobtrusive; only a very stern critic would remark that the miraculous habit fits her superb bust a shade *too* well. You see a frank fearless face, at times perhaps a trifle too mutinously defiant; a broad, brent, white forehead; clear, bold blue eyes, flashing often in merriment, seldom in anger; and thick coils of soft gold-brown hair, braided tightly under the compact riding-hat. It is not exactly a pretty picture, though its piquancy might be attractive to such as admire that peculiar style.

The solitary horseman who never leaves her side is Mr. Lacy, the professional artist, who has reduced riding over fences to a science. In consideration of large monies, perfect mounts, and unlimited claret and cigars, he consents to act as mentor and pioneer to the reckless *Reine des Ribaudes*: the office is no sinecure, and the wages are conscientiously earned. There is a look of grave anxiety on his pale intellectual face to-day, such as may well become a brave man who estimates aright the importance and perils of a task set before him, and

prepares to encounter them without reluctance or fear. Of a truth, in a country like this, where, as a stranger, she rides 'for her own hand,' and means going, it is no child's-play to *chaperon* Pelagia.

One other personage remains to be noticed—I venture to hope you are not tired of him yet—Alan Wyverne; looking thinner and browner than when we saw him last, but in very fair plight notwithstanding, who has just come down into the Shires, with a larger stud than he ever owned in the old days. He had no idea of the Vavasours being in the neighbourhood, or perhaps even Rylstone Gorse would not have tempted him to ride the score of miles that lay between the fixture and his hunting quarters. He has got over the meeting with his uncle most successfully; how cordial it was, on both sides, you may easily imagine. But he has so many friends to greet, and congratulations to answer, that he has not found time, yet, to approach the carriage in which Lady Mildred is reclining. Alan has nothing in his stable, so far, that he likes so well as his ancient favourite; he rides him first-horse to-day. In truth, Red Lancer is a very model of a fast weight-carrier; you cannot say whether blood or bone predominates in the superb shape and clean powerful limbs, and all his admirers allow 'that he is looking

fitter than ever.' He is apt to indulge in certain violent eccentricities in the first five minutes after he is mounted, but he has settled down now, and bears himself with a quiet, stately dignity ; nevertheless, there is a resolute look about his head, implying obstinacy to be ruled only by a stronger will.

The ten-minutes' law has more than expired, and, at an imperceptible signal from the Master, the pack moves on slowly towards the gorse. We will not wait to witness the certain find, but get forward a mile or two, to a point that the fox is almost sure to pass ; being invisible we can do no harm, even if we do cross his line.

Did you ever see a more truculent fence than that on your right, which stretches along continuously for twelve hundred yards or more, on the Rylstone side of the road on which we are standing ? The double rails, both sloping outwards, are much higher and wider apart than usual, and the charge of a squadron would hardly break the new tough oak timber ; to go in and out is impossible, for there is a deep ditch in the middle fringed by meagre, stunted quick-set ; and on the landing side there is actually another trench, vast enough to swallow up horse and rider, if by any chance they got so far. The only outlet is through double gates, with a bridge of

treacherous planks between them. There was malice premeditated in the mind that contrived that fearful barrier. The owner of the farm is a morose, hard-fisted Scotch presbyterian, who regards all sport as a snare and device of the Evil One, and acts according to his narrow light, viciously. When he came into the country a year ago, he was afraid to warn the hounds off his land, but went to a considerable expense to stop them, as he thought, quite as effectually. The pleasant innovation of wiring the fences was unknown in those days (soon, I suppose, they will strew calthrops along the headlands, and conceal spring-guns cunningly, to explode if you hit the binders); but David Macausland did his worst after the fashion of the period; and so sat down behind his entrenchments with the grim satisfaction of a consummate engineer, waiting for the enemy to come on.

You know the occupants of that low phaeton that sweeps round the corner so smoothly and rapidly, pulling up within a hundred yards of us? Miss Vavasour's ponies are too fiery to be trusted in a crowd, so she has listened to Maud Brabazon's suggestion that they should take their chance of seeing something of the run, instead of going to the meet—yielding the more readily because her own fancy, to-day, inclines to comparative solitude. There

they are, left entirely to their own devices, with only a staid elderly groom to keep them out of mischief.

The fair adventuresses have not to wait; before they have been posted five minutes, a symphony and crash of hound-music comes cheerily down the wind, and a dark speck, developing itself into shape and colour as it approaches, steals swiftly down the fifty-acre pasture. Fortunately they are not forward enough to do any harm; even the restless ponies stand still, as if by instinct, while a big dog-fox crosses the road, quite unconscious of the bright eyes that are following him; he whisks the white tag of his brush knowingly, just as he clears the fence, evidently thinking it will prove a 'stopper,' at least to his human foes. Two minutes more, and the pack sweeps compactly over the crest of the rising ground; a little in the rear, on either flank, come the real front-rankers—the ambitious spirits who, wherever they go, will assert their pride of place; the very flower of science and courage; the best and boldest of England's *Hippodamastæ*. Do you think the whole world could show you such another sight as this?

There is Cosmo Considine, sending Satanella along as if he had another spare neck at home, in case of accidents, and as if she had ten companions

in the stable (instead of a brace) to replace her if she comes to grief. There is Lord Roncesvaux, riding as jealous as any of them, though he would scorn to confess such a weakness; there is a fierce light now in his broad black eyes, though the listlessness has scarcely left his face. There is Nick Gunstone, holding his own gallantly, discreet enough to give 'the swells' a widish berth. And there, in the van of the battle, flutters the bright-blue habit, and gleams the soft golden hair.

'How very fortunate!' Helen Vavasour cried. 'We are just in the right place; they must cross the road, and we shall see all the fencing.'

Mrs. Brabazon was more experienced than her companion, and, indeed, had been no mean performer over a country in her day. She shook her pretty head negatively, as she answered—

'I am afraid not, dear, unless there is an unusual amount of chivalry out to-day. I have been looking at that place, and I believe it is simply impracticable. They must get round it somehow, and the hounds will leave them here.'

The old groom, standing at the ponies' heads, touched his hat, in assent and approval.

'You're quite right, my lady,' he said. 'There's no man in these parts as would try that fence; no more there didn't ought to. It's hard on a thirty-

foot fly, let alone the drop; and it's a broken neck or back if you falls short, or hits a rail.'

The *impasse* is evidently well known, and the leaders of the field appear to be very much of the speaker's opinion; for instead of following the hounds down the middle of the pasture, they begin to diverge on either side, the huntsman setting the example. Will Darrell takes fences as they come, very cheerfully, in an ordinary way; but a great general has no business to risk his life like a reckless subaltern; and the idea of being laid up with a broken limb so early in the season is simply intolerable. With Lord Roncesvaux's servants duty stands first of all; they know that no credit won by mere hard riding would excuse a fault of rashness, or soften the implacable Master's anger. Cosmo Considine acknowledges the necessity of a compromise, growling out an imprecation in some strange outlandish tongue; and Pelagia's pilot, after a hurried word exchanged with the Major, for whom he has a great respect and esteem, follows him to the right, utterly disregarding the remonstrances of his impetuous charge. Even Nick Gunstone thinks that this will be rather too strong an illustration of his favourite theory, and reserves the young one's steadying lesson for a more convenient season.

A few sceptics determine to judge for themselves,

and ride right down to the fence; but one glance satisfies them, and they gallop along it in both directions, rather losing ground by their obstinacy than otherwise. Amongst these is Lord Clydesdale. Perhaps the Earl is aware of the proximity of the pony-carriage; at any rate, he thinks it necessary to make a demonstration; so he takes a short circuit, and pretends to charge the fence, with much bluster and flurry. Santiago behaves with a charity and courtesy very amiable, considering the provocation he has undergone, and tries to save his master's honour by taking on himself the odium of a decisive refusal. But the sham is too glaring to deceive the veriest novice; Maud Brabazon's smile is marvelously meaning, and Miss Vavasour's curling lip does not dissemble its scorn.

Half a minute later, Maud happened to be looking in an opposite direction; an exclamation from the groom, and a low cry, almost like a moan, from her companion, made her turn quickly. Helen had dropped the reins; her hands were clasped tightly, as they lay on the bearskin-rug, and her great eyes gleamed bright and wild with eagerness and terror; they were riveted on a solitary horseman, who came down at the fence straight and fast.

Alan Wyverne had been baulked at the brook by

someone's crossing him, and the pace was so tremendous that even Red Lancer's turn of speed had not yet quite enabled him to make up lost ground. It so happened, that he had ridden along that double on his way to the meet, and though he fully appreciated the peril, he had then decided that it was just within his favourite's powers, and consequently ought to be tried.

Truly, at that moment, the pair would have made a superb picture. Alan was sitting quite still, rather far back in the saddle; his hands level and low on the withers, with hold enough on Red Lancer's mouth to stop a swerve, but giving the head free and fair play; his lips slightly compressed, but not a sign of trepidation or doubt on his quiet face. The brave old horse was, in his way, quite as admirable; like his master, he had determined to get as far over the fence as pluck and sinew would send them; so on he came, with his small ears pointing forward dagger-wise, momentarily increasing his speed, but measuring every stride, and judging his distance, so as to take off at the proper spot to a line.

They were within thirty yards of the rails now, and still Helen Vavasour gazed on—steadfast and statue-like—without a quiver of lip or a droop of eyelash. Maud Brabazon's nerves were better than

most women's, but they failed her then. She felt a wild desire to spring up and wave Alan back ; but a cold faint shudder came over her, and she could only close her eyes in helpless terror.

There came a rush of hoofs sounding on elastic turf—a fierce snort as Red Lancer rose to the spring—and then a dull smothered crash, as of a huge body's falling.

Maud felt her companion sink back by her side, trembling violently : then she heard a hoarse exclamation from the groom of wonderment and applause ; then Wyverne's clear voice speaking to his horse encouragingly, and then—she opened her eyes just in time to see the further road-fence taken in the neatest possible style.

There had been no fall after all. Red Lancer's hind hoofs broke away the outer bank of the ditch, and he 'knuckled' fearfully on landing ; but a strong practised hand recovered him just in time to save his credit and his knees.

Negotiations were entered into soon afterwards with Mr. Macausland, and powerful arguments brought to bear upon his cupidity ; the austere Presbyterian compromised with the unrighteous Mammon, so far as to suppress the obnoxious middle ditch and render the fence barely practicable. But they point out the spot still, as a proof of the space

that a perfect hunter can cover, with the aid of high courage and strong hind-quarters, if he is ridden straight and fairly. That elderly groom, who is saturnine and sceptical by nature, prone to undervalue and discredit the exploits of others, when one of his fellows speaks of a big leap, always quells and quenches the narrator utterly, by playing his trump-card of the great Rylstone double.

It is almost an invariable rule—if a man by exceptional luck or pluck ‘sets’ the field, the hounds are sure to throw up their heads within a couple of furlongs. Fortune, as if tired of persecuting Alan Wyverne, gives him a rare turn to-day.

There was a scent, such as one meets about twice in a season. The field, spread out like a fan, begins to converge again, and the front rank are riding like men possessed, to make up their lost ground. All in vain—nothing without wings would catch the ‘flying bitches’ now, as they stream over the broad level pastures without check or stay, drinking in the hot trail through wide up-turned nostrils, mute as death in their savage thirst for blood. It was a trivial triumph, no doubt, hardly worthy of a highly rational being; but the hunting instinct is one of the strongest in our imperfect nature, after all: I believe that it falls to the lot of very few to enjoy such intense, simple happiness as Wyverne expe-

rienced for about eighteen minutes, as he swept on, alone, on the flank of the racing pack, rejoicing in Red Lancer's unfaltering strength. Such a tremendous burst must necessarily be brief. As Alan crashes through the rail of a great 'oxer,' an excited agriculturist screams—'He's close afore you.' Close—the hounds know that better than you can tell them. Look how the veterans are straining to the front. Suddenly, as they stream along a thick bullfinch, old Bonnibelle wheels short round and glides through the fence like a ghost; her comrades follow as best they may; there is a snap—a crash of tongues—and a savage worry. Alan Wyverne, too, turns in his tracks; and driving Red Lancer madly through the blackthorn, clears himself from the falling horse, just in time to rush in to the rescue, and—with the aid of a friendly carter, who uses whip and voice lustily—to save from sharp wrangling teeth rather a mutilated trophy.

Now, is not that worth living for? Wyverne could answer the question very satisfactorily, as he loosens Red Lancer's girth and turns his head to the wind, pulling his small ears, and stroking his lofty crest caressingly. Nearly five minutes have passed, and the hounds are beginning to wander about in a desultory, half-satisfied way, as is their wont after a kill, before Lord Roncesvaux, and the huntsman,

and three or four more celebrities, put in a discomfited appearance.

It speaks ill for our chivalry that we should have left the pony-carriage to itself all this time ; but that 'cracker' over the grass was too strong a temptation ; we were bound to see the end of it.

Mrs. Brabazon was the first to speak, breathing quick and nervously.

'Oh, Helen, was not that magnificent? But were you ever so frightened?'

The wild look had passed out of the girl's eyes, yet they were still strangely dreamy and vague.

'It was very fearful,' she said ; 'but I ought not to have been frightened. There is no one like *him*—no one half so cool and brave. I have known that for so many years!'

Maud's keen glance rested on the speaker's face for a second or two. What she read there did not seem greatly to please her.

'I think we had better be turning homewards,' she said, gravely ; 'I feel tired already, and I am sure we shall see nothing more to-day.'

From Miss Vavasour's flushing cheek, and the impatient way in which she gathered up the reins and turned her ponies, it was easy to guess that she did not wish her thoughts to be too closely scanned just then. But before they had driven three

hundred yards, she was musing again. At last her lips moved involuntarily. Maud Brabazon's quick ear caught a low, piteous whisper—'I don't think he even saw me'—and then a weary, helpless sigh. In just such a sigh may have been breathed the dying despair of that unhappy Scottish maiden, who pined so long for the coming of her lover from beyond the sea, and whose worn-out heart broke when he rode in under the archway, without marking the wave of her kerchief, or looking up at her window.

It was a very silent drive homewards. One of those two had good right to be pensive. Last night, Lord Clydesdale, utterly vanquished and intoxicated by her beauty, spoke out, right plainly. The day of grace that Helen claimed for reflection is half gone already, and the irrevocable answer must be given to-morrow.

Shall we say—as they said in olden times to criminals called upon to plead—'So God send you good deliverance?' Truly it was a kindly, courteous formula enough; but I fancy it carried little meaning to the minds of the judge or jury, and little comfort to the heavy heart of the attainted traitor.

Throughout the country side that night men seemed unable to talk long about anything, without

recurring to the morning's run and the feat which had made it so singularly remarkable. Even Clydesdale did not venture to dissent or show discontent when Wyverne's nerve and judgment were praised up to the skies; he only swelled sulkily, and indulged under his breath in a whole string of his favourite curses, registering another involuntary offence against the name he hated so bitterly. Red Lancer came in for his full share of the glory; they discussed his points and perfections one by one, till you might have drawn his portrait without ever having seen him. He was as famous now, as that mighty war-horse of whom the quaint old ballad sings—

So grete he was, of back so brode,
So wight and warily he trode,
On earth was not his peer;
Ne horse in land that was so tall;
The knight him clepèd 'Lancivall,'
But lords at board and grooms in stall
Clepèd him—'Grand Destrere.'

In the servants'-hall at Beauprè Lodge, the witness of the feat thus expressed himself, an honest admiration lighting up for once his hard, rough-hewn face—

'It's very lucky I ain't a young 'oman of fortun'
(signs of unanimous adhesion from his audience,
especially from the feminine division). 'Ah, you

may laugh. If I was, I'd follow Sir Alan right over the world, without his asking of me, if it was only for the pleasure of blacking his boots.'


After this, who will say that 'derring-do' is not still held in honour, or that hero-worship has vanished out of the land?

CHAPTER VII.

QUAM DEUS VULT PERDERE.

THE noon of night is past, and Helen Vavasour is alone in her chamber, without a thought of sleep. In truth, the damsel is exceeding fair to look upon—though it is a picture over which we dare not linger—as she leans back, half reclining, on the low couch near the hearth ; a loose dressing-robe of blue cachemire faced with quilted white satin, draping her figure gracefully, without concealing its grand outlines : her slender feet, in dainty velvet slippers broided with seed-pearl, crossed with an unstudied coquetry that displays the arched instep ravishingly ; a torrent of shining dark hair falling over neck and shoulder ; a thin line of pearly teeth showing through the scarlet lips that are slightly parted ; the light of burning embers reflected in her deep eyes, that seem trying to read the secrets of the Future in the red recesses and the fitful flames.

She had been musing thus for many minutes, when a quick step came across the corridor ; there



was a gentle tap at the door, and it opened to admit Mrs. Brabazon.

‘I thought I should find you up,’ she said. ‘I’m strangely wakeful to-night, Helen, and very much disposed to talk. Do you mind my staying here till you or I feel more sleepy?’

Miss Vavasour assented eagerly; indeed, she was rather glad of an excuse for breaking off her ‘maiden meditation;’ so she established her visitor in the most luxurious chair she could find, not without a caress of welcome.

Nevertheless, in spite of their conversational inclinations, neither seemed in a particular hurry to make a start; and, for some minutes, there was rather an embarrassed silence. At length Mrs. Brabazon looked up and spoke suddenly.

‘Helen, what answer do you mean to give to the Great Earl to-morrow? Don’t open your eyes wondering; I drew my own conclusions from what I saw last night. Besides, Lady Mildred is perfectly well informed; though she has not said a word to you, she has spoken to me about it, and asked me to help the good cause with my counsel and advice, if I could find time and occasion. Shall I begin?’

She spoke lightly; but the grave anxiety on her face belied her tone. Miss Vavasour’s thoughts had been devoted so exclusively to one subject, that its

abrupt introduction now did not startle her at all. Her smile was cold and somewhat disdainful, as she replied—

‘Thank you, very much. But it is hardly worth while to go through all the advantages of the alliance; I have had a full and complete catalogue of them already. They chose Max for an ambassador, and I assure you he discharged his duties quite conscientiously, and did not spare me a single detail; he was nearly eloquent sometimes; and I never saw him so near enthusiasm as when he described the Clydesdale diamonds. He made me understand, too, very plainly, that the fortunes of our family depend a good deal upon me. Did you know that we are absolutely ruined, and have hardly a right, now, to call Dene ours?’

Ah, woe and dishonour! Is it Helen’s voice that is speaking? Have twelve months changed the frank, impulsive girl into a calculating, worldly woman, a pupil that her own mother might be proud of? For all the emotion or interest she betrays, she might be a princess, wooed by proxy, to be the bride of a king whom she has never seen.

Some such thoughts as these rushed across Mand Brabazon’s mind, as she listened; great fear and pity rose up in her kind heart, till her eyes could scarcely refrain from tears.

‘I had heard something of this,’ she said, sadly ; ‘though I did not know things were so desperate. There are a hundred arguments that would urge you to say—Yes, and only two or three to make you say—No. It is absolutely the most brilliant match in England. You will have the most perfect establishment that ever was dreamt of, and we shall all envy you intensely ; it has been contemplated for you, and you have expected the proposal yourself for months ; I know all that. Yesterday—I should not have thought it probable you could hesitate ; to-day—I do beg and pray you to pause. I think you will be in great danger if you marry the Earl. Have you deceived yourself into believing that you love him ?’

‘I don’t deceive myself ; and I have never deceived him. He is ready and willing to take what I can give, and expects no more, I am certain. I do not love Lord Clydesdale ; and I am not even sure that we shall suit each other. But he is anxious to make the trial, and I—am content. I know that I shall try honestly to do my duty as his wife, if he will let me. That is all. Time works wonders, they say ; it may do something for us both.’

Still the same slow, distinct utterance ; the same formal, constrained manner ; as if she were repeat-

ing a lesson thoroughly learnt by rote. Maud Brabazon was only confirmed in her purpose to persevere to the uttermost in her warning.

‘I have no right to advise,’ she said; ‘and moral preaching comes with an ill grace, I dare say, from my foolish lips. But indeed—indeed—I only speak because I like you sincerely, and I would save you if I could. One may deceive oneself about the past, as well as the future. Are you sure that you can forget? Are you sure that an old love has not the mastery still? Helen, if I were your mother I would not trust you.’

The girl’s cheek flushed brightly—less in confusion than in anger.

‘You need have no false delicacy, Maud. If you mean that I shall never love any one as I have loved Alan, if you mean that I still care for him more than for any living creature, you are quite right. But it is all over between us, for ever and ever. We shall always be cousins henceforth—no more; he said so himself. If a word could make us all we once were, I don’t think I would speak it; I am sure *he* never would. But, my dear, it does surprise me beyond everything, to hear *you* arguing on the romantic side. You never could have worshipped Mr. Brabazon, before or after mar-

riage ; and yet you amuse yourself better than any one I know.'

Miss Vavasour's quick temper—always impatient of contradiction—was in the ascendant just then, or she would scarcely have uttered that last taunt. She bitterly repented it when she saw the other cower under the blow, bowing her head into her clasped hands, humbly and sorrowfully.

When Maud looked up, not one of the many who had admired and loved her radiant face would have recognised it in its pale resolve.

'You only spoke the truth, Helen. Don't be penitent ; but listen as patiently as you can. At least, my example shall not encourage you in running into danger. I will tell you a secret that I meant to carry to my grave. You incur a greater risk than ever I did ; see, how it has fared with me. It is quite true that I did not love my husband when I accepted him ; but I had never known even a serious fancy for any one else. I imagined I was hardened enough to be safe in making a conventional marriage. And so—so it went on well enough for some years ; but my falsehood was punished at last. They say, it is sharp pain when frozen blood begins to circulate ; ah, Helen—trust me—it is worse still, when one's heart wakes up. I cannot tell you how it came about with me. He

never tried to make me flirt, like the rest of them ; but when he spoke to me, his voice always changed and softened. He never tried to monopolize me, but wherever I went, he was sure to be ; and, some nights, when I was more wild and mischievous than usual, I could see wonder and pity in his great melancholy eyes : they began to haunt me, those eyes ; and I began to miss him and feel disappointed and lonely, if an evening passed without our meeting. But I never betrayed myself, till one night Geoffrey told me, suddenly, that he was to sail in four days for the coast of Africa. I could not help trembling all over, and I knew that my face was growing white and cold ; I looked up in his—just for one second—and I read his secret, and confessed mine. He had mercy on my weakness—God reward him for it !—he only asked for a flower that I wore, when I would have given him my life or my soul ; for I was wicked and mad, that night. It was so like him : I know he would never tempt me : he would save me from going wrong if it cost him his heart's blood. Fevers and horrors of all sorts beset them on that coast : I might read Geoffrey's death in the next *Gazette*, and yet—his lips have not touched my hand. You say I amuse myself. Do you know, that I must have light, and society, and excitement, or I should go mad ? I dare not sit at home and

think for an hour. I have to feed my miserable vanity, to keep my conscience quiet. I am pure in act and deed, and no one can whisper away my honour; but in thought I am viler than many outcasts—treacherous, and sinning every day, not only against my marriage vow, but against *him*. I often wish I were dead, but I am not fit to die.’

She had fallen forward as she spoke, and lay prone with her head buried in Helen’s lap—a wreck of womanhood in her abasement and self-contempt. The wind, that had been rising gustily for hours past, swelled into fury just then, driving the sleet against the casements like showers of small-shot, and howling savagely through the cedars, as though in mockery of the stricken heart’s wail. Maud Brabazon shivered and lifted up her wild scared face—

‘Do you hear *that*?’ she said. ‘I never sleep when a gale is blowing. The other night Bertie Grenvil was pleading his very best; I answered at random, and I daresay I laughed nervously; he fancied it was because his words had confused me. I was only thinking—what the weather might be on the Western coast, for a gust like that last was sweeping by. Ah, Helen, darling! do listen and be warned in time: if you don’t see your danger, pause and reflect, if only for my sake. Have I made my miserable confession in vain?’

Miss Vavasour's expression was set and steadfast as ever, though tears swam in her eyes: she leant down and clasped her soft white arms round Maud Brabazon's neck, and pressed a pitiful tender kiss on the poor humbled head.

'Not in vain, dearest!' she whispered; 'I shall always love and trust you henceforth, because I know you thoroughly. But I cannot go back. It is too late now, even if I would. I hope I shall be able to do my duty; at least I need not fear the peril of ever loving again. I must accept Lord Clydesdale to-morrow.'

Maud drew quickly out of the close embrace, and threw herself back, burying her face in her hands once more; when she uncovered it, it was possessed by nothing but a blank white despair.

'The punishment is coming!' she said; 'I can do harm enough, but I can do no good, if I try ever so hard—that is clear. I will help you always to the uttermost of my power; but we will never speak of this again.'

She rose directly afterwards, and after the exchange of a long caress—somewhat mechanical on one side—quitted the room with a vague, uncertain step. So; Helen's very last chance was cast away, and she was left to the enjoyment of her prospects and her dreams.

The decisive interview came off on the following morning. There was not a pretence of romance throughout. Lord Clydesdale manifested a proper amount of eagerness and *empressement* ; Helen was perfectly cool and imperial ; nevertheless, the suitor seemed more than satisfied. The negotiation was laid in due form before the Squire and Lady Mildred in the course of the day. To do the Earl justice, he had never been niggardly or captious in finance, and his liberality now was almost ostentatiously magnificent. By some means or other he had been made thoroughly aware of the state of affairs at Dene. Besides superb proposals of dower and pin-money, he offered to advance, at absurdly moderate interest, enough to clear off all the encumbrances on the Vavasour property ; and the whole of the sum was to be settled on younger children—in default of these, to be solely at Helen's disposal.

The poor Squire, though not taken by surprise, was fairly overwhelmed. The temptation of comparatively freeing the dear old house and domain would have proved nearly irresistible even to a stronger mind and will ; still, he felt far from comfortable. He did try to salve his unquiet conscience by requiring an interview with his daughter, and seeking therein to arrive at the real state of her heart. It was an honest offer of self-sacrifice, but

really a very safe one. Helen did not betray the faintest regret or constraint; so Hubert Vavasour resigned himself, not unwillingly, to the timely rescue. I have not patience to linger over Lady Mildred's intense, undemonstrative triumph.

It was settled that the marriage should take place early in the spring. All the preliminaries went on swiftly and smoothly, as golden wheels will run when thoroughly adjusted and oiled. Miss Vavasour behaved admirably: she accepted numberless congratulations, gratefully and gracefully; in her intercourse with her *fiancé*, she evinced no prudery or undue reserve, but nevertheless contrived to repress the Earl's enthusiasm within very endurable limits.

Only one scene occurred, before the wedding, which is worth recording: it was rather a characteristic one. Perhaps you have forgotten that, in the second chapter of this uneventful history, there was mentioned the name of one Schmidt, a mighty iron-founder of Newmanham, who had bought up all the mortgages on Dene? His intention had been evident from the first; and just about the time of the last affiancement, his lawyers gave notice that he meant to call in the money or foreclose without mercy.

Now the Squire, though he naturally exulted, as a Gentile and a landed proprietor, in the discom-

future of the Hebrew capitalist, would have allowed things to be arranged quietly, in the regular professional way. But this, Lord Clydesdale, when consulted on the subject, would by no means suffer. He begged that the meeting of the lawyers might take place at Dene; and that, if it were possible, Ephraim Schmidt should be induced to attend in person; the paying off of the mortgages was not to be previously hinted at in any way. The whims of great men must be sometimes humoured, even by the law; and this was not such a very unreasonable one after all.

‘I wouldn’t miss seeing the Jew’s face if it cost another thousand!’ the Earl said, with a fierce laugh: so it was settled that he was to be present at the interview.

Mr. Schmidt and his solicitor arrived punctually at the appointed hour; there was no fear of the former’s absenting himself on so important an occasion. ‘Nothing like looking after things yourself’ was one of his favourite maxims, enforced with a wink of intense sagacity. He was absolutely ignorant of legal formalities, but not the less convinced that such could not be properly carried out without his own superintendence.

The financier’s appearance was quite a study. He had for some time past affected rather a rural

style of attire, and his costume now was the New-manham ideal of a flourishing country squire. He chose, with ostentatious humility, the most modest of his equippages to take him to Dene; but he mounted it like a triumphal car. Truly there was great joy in Israel on that eventful morning, for all his family knew the errand on which their sire and lord was bent, and exulted, as is their wont, unctuously.

Ephraim Schmidt was a short bulky man, somewhat under fifty; his heavy, sensual features, betrayed at once his origin and the habits of high-living to which he was notoriously prone. His companion was a striking contrast. There was rather a foreign look about Morris Davidson's keen handsome face, and those intensely brilliant black eyes are scarcely naturalized yet on this side of the Channel—but the Semitic stamp was barely perceptible. His manner was very quiet and courteous, but never cringing, nor was there anything obsequious about his ready smile. He was choice in his raiment, but it was always subdued in its tone, and he wore no jewels beyond a signet key-ring, and one pearl of great price at his neck. He was the type of a class that has been developed only within the last half century—the *petit-maitre* order of legalists—whose demeanour, like that of the Louis Quinze

Abbé's, is a perpetual contradiction of their staid profession, but who nevertheless know their business thoroughly, and follow it up with unscrupulous obstinacy. When Mr. Davidson senior died (who had long been Ephraim Schmidt's confidential solicitor), men marvelled that the cautious capitalist could entrust his affairs to such young and inexperienced hands; in truth, he had at first many doubts and misgivings, but these soon vanished as he began to appreciate Morris's cool, pitiless nature, and iron nerves. The wolf-cub's coat was sleek and soft enough, and he never showed his teeth unnecessarily; but his fangs were sharper, and his gripe more fatally tenacious, than even his gaunt old sire's.

So, through the clear frosty morning, the two Jews drove jocundly along, beguiling the way with pleasant anticipations of the business before them. The lawyer had heard of Lord Clydesdale's engagement to Miss Vavasour, and thought it just possible that under the circumstances some compromise might be attempted. But to this view of the case his patron would in nowise incline, and he discreetly forebore to press it. They passed through the double towers flanking the huge iron gates; and the broad undulating park stretched out before them, clumps of lofty timber studding the smooth turf, while grey turrets and pinnacles just showed in the

distance through the leafless trees. The Hebrew's heart swelled, almost painfully, with pride and joy. He had been wandering for many a year—not unhappily or unprofitably, it is true—through the commercial Desert, and now, he looked upon the fair Land of Promise, only waiting for him to arise and take possession, when he had once cast out the Amorite. When they drove up to the great portico, he was actually perspiring with satisfaction, in spite of the cold. He grasped his companion's arm, and whispered, hoarsely—

‘Mind, Morris, they’ll ask for time: but we wont give them a day!—not a day.’

The chief butler received the visitors in the hall, and ushered them himself to the library. Ephraim Schmidt, in the midst of his unholy triumph, could not help being impressed by the grave dignity of that august functionary. He began to think if it would not be possible, by proffer of large monies, to tempt him to desert his master's fallen fortunes, and to abide in the house that he became so well. A pleasant, idle dream! Solomon made the Afréets and Genii his slaves; but, if the Great King had been revived in the plenitude of his power, he would never have tempted that seneschal to serve him, while a Gentile survived on the land.

The family solicitor of the Vavasours was sitting

before a table overspread with bulky papers, with his clerk close by his side. He was thin, and white-haired, with a round withered face, pleasant withal, like a succulent Ribstone pippin; his manner was very gentle, and almost timid, but no lawyer alive could boast that he had ever got the best of a negotiation in which Mr. Faulkner was concerned. He greeted the capitalist very courteously, and Mr. Davidson very coldly, for—he had seen *him* before. There was one other occupant of the library—a tall man, lounging in the embrasure of a distant window, who never turned his head when the new-comers entered: it seemed as though the bleak winter landscape outside had superior attractions. Ephraim Schmidt hardly noticed him; but Davidson felt a disagreeable thrill of apprehension as he recognised the figure of Lord Clydesdale. It is needless to enumerate the verifications and comparisons of many voluminous documents that had perforce to be gone through. The mortgagee got very impatient before they were ended.

‘Yes, yes,’ he kept repeating, nervously, ‘it is all correct; but come to the point—to the point.’

Mr. Faulkner was perfectly imperturbable, neither hurrying himself in the least, nor making any unnecessary delay.

'I believe everything is quite correct,' he said, at last. 'Now, Mr. Davidson, may I ask you what your client's intentions are? Is there any possibility of a compromise?'

'I fear, none whatever,' was the quiet answer. 'We have given ample notice, and the equity of redemption cannot be extended. My client is anxious to invest in land, and we could hardly find a more eligible opening than foreclosure here would afford us.'

'Exactly so,' the old lawyer retorted. 'I only asked the question, because I was instructed to come to an explicit understanding. It does not much matter; for—we are prepared to pay off every farthing.'

The small thin hand seemed weighty and puissant as an athlete's, as he laid it on a steel-bound coffer beside him, with a significant gesture of security too tranquil to be defiant.

Cool and crafty as he was, Davidson was fairly taken unawares. He recoiled in blank amazement. Ephraim Schmidt started from his chair like a maniac, his eyes protruding wildly, and his face purple-black with rage.

'Pay off everything?' he shrieked. 'I don't believe it: it's a lie—a swindle. Not have Dene? I'll have it, in spite of you all?' The churned

foam flew from his bulbous lips, as from the jaws of a baited boar.

The silent spectator in the window turned round, then, and stood contemplating the group, not striving to repress a harsh, scornful laugh. That filled up the measure of the unhappy Israelite's frenzy. He made a sort of blind plunge forward, shaking off the warning fingers with which Davidson sought to detain him.

'D—n you, let me go,' he howled out. 'Who is that man? What does he do here? I *will* know.'

The person addressed strode on slowly till he came close to the speaker, and looked him in the face, still with the same cruel laugh on his own.

'I'll answer you,' he said. 'I was christened Raoul Delamere, but they call me Lord Clydesdale now; and I hope to marry Mr. Vavasour's only daughter. I am here—because I am infidel enough to enjoy seeing a Jew taken on the hip. I wouldn't have missed this—to clear off the biggest of your mortgages. So you fancied you were going to reign at Dene? Not if you had had another hundred thousand at your back. If we only have warning, the old blood can hold its own, and beat the best of you yet. Mr. Faulkner, don't you think you had better pay him, and let him go?'

The change of tone in those last words, from brutal disdain to studied courtesy, was the very climax of insult. It was an unworthy triumph, no doubt, but a very complete one. The Earl remained as much master of the position as ever was Front de Bœuf. The Jew was utterly annihilated. To have come there with the power of life and death in his hand, and now to be treated as an ordinary tradesman presenting a Christmas bill! He staggered back step by step, and sunk into a chair, dropping his head, and groaning heavily. Davidson had recovered himself by this time. The elder lawyer only sat silent, and scandalized, lifting his eyebrows in mute testimony against such unprofessional proceedings.

‘We can hardly conclude such important business to-day,’ Morris said. ‘My client’s excitement is a sufficient excuse. We know your intentions now, Mr. Faulkner, and there is ample time to settle everything. I will call upon you at any time or place you like to name.’

So, after a few more words, it was settled.

Ephraim Schmidt went out, like a man in a dream, from the house that he had hoped to call his own; only moaning under his breath, like a vanquished Shylock—‘Let us go home, let us go home.’ The chief butler (who had been aware of the state

of affairs throughout) dealt him the last blow in the hall, by inquiring with exquisite courtesy, 'If he would take any luncheon before he went?' The miserable Hebrew quivered all over, as a victim at the stake might shrink under the last ingenuity of torture. Truly, the meanest of the many debtors who had sued him in vain for mercy, need not have envied the usurer then.

O dark-eyed Miriam, and auburn-haired Deborah ! lay aside your golden harps, or other instruments of music that your soul delights in : no song of gladness shall be raised in your tents to-night ; it is for the daughters of the uncircumcised to triumph.

When the Squire heard an account of the morning's proceedings, he by no means shared in Clydesdale's satisfaction, and rather failed to appreciate the point of the jest. Hubert's thoroughbred instincts revolted against the idea of even a Jew usurer's having been grossly insulted under his roof, when the man only came to ask for his own ; besides this, he understood the feeling that had been at work in the Earl's breast, and despised him accordingly. The difference in social position was too overwhelming to make the match a fair one ; but in other respects the antagonists were about on a par. It was just this—a phase of purse-pride vanquished by another and a more potential one. Such a victory

brings little honour. The transformed rod of the Lawgiver swallowed up the meaner serpents; but it was only a venomous reptile, after all.

Wyverne felt neither wrath nor despair when the news of Helen's engagement came: he had quite made up his mind that she would marry soon; but he was sad and pensive. He did not change his opinions easily, and he had formed a very strong one about Clydesdale's character: he thought the Earl was as little likely as any man alive to rule a high-spirited mate wisely and well. Nevertheless, Alan indited an epistle that even Lady Mildred could not help admiring: it was guarded, but not in the least formal or constrained; kind and sincerely affectionate, without a tinge of reproach, or a single allusion that could give pain. He saw 'my lady' twice, Helen once, before the latter's marriage, and was equally successful with his verbal congratulations. Of course the interviews were not *tête-à-têtes*: all parties concerned took good care of that. Wyverne and his aunt displayed admirable tact and *sang froid*; but the demoiselle cast both into the shade: her manner was far more natural, and her composure less studied. Truly, the training of the *Grande Dame* progressed rapidly, and the results promised to be fearfully complete.

Alan did intimate an intention of being present at



the wedding ; but I fear he was scarcely ingenuous there. At all events, urgent private affairs took him abroad two days before the ceremony, no one knew exactly where ; and it was three weeks before he appeared on the surface of society again.

Io, Hymenæe ! Scatter flowers, or other missile oblations, profusely, you nubile virgins. O choir of appointed youths ! Roll out, I beseech you, the Epithalamium roundly : let not the fault be imputed to you, if it sounds like a requiem.


So, we bid farewell to Helen Vavasour's maiden history—not without heaviness of heart. Henceforth it befits us to stand aside, with doffed beaver and bated breath, as the Countess of Clydesdale passes by.

CHAPTER VIII.

MAGNA EST VERITAS.

FIFTEEN or sixteen months are come and gone, and the faces of people and things are but little changed. Yes, one of our dramatic personages is a good deal altered for the worse—Alan Wyverne. He became sadder and wiser in this wise.

I forgot to tell you that the delicate state of Mrs. Rawdon Lenox's health, and of her affairs, had made a lengthened Continental tour very desirable. She remained abroad nearly two years, and did not return to England till the summer immediately following the Clydesdale marriage. It was late in the autumn when she and Alan met. If the latter had been forewarned of the *rencontre*, it is probable he would have avoided it by declining the invitation to Guestholme Priory; but when he found himself actually under the same roof with the 'Dark Ladye' (so some friend or enemy had re-christened her), he felt a certain satisfaction in the idea of clearing up a



mystery that had never ceased to perplex and torment him. Their first greeting was rather cold and constrained on both sides ; but things could not remain on this footing long. Nina had no fancy for an armed neutrality with an ancient ally, and always brought the question of war or peace to an issue with the least possible delay.

When Alan came into the drawing-room after dinner, Mrs. Lenox's look was a sufficient summons, even without the significant movement of the fan, which she managed like a Madrilena. He sat down by her side, his pulse quickening a little with expectation ; but curiosity was the sole excitement. For awhile they talked about their travels and other indifferent subjects. The lady got tired of that child's-play first, and broke ground boldly.

'I suppose the interdict is taken off now?' she said. 'Will you believe, that I am really sorry that there is no longer a cause for your avoiding me? Will you believe, that no one regretted it, and felt for you more than I did, when I heard your engagement was broken off? Do tell me, that neither I nor my unfortunate affairs had anything to do with it. I have been worrying myself ever since with the fancy, that your great kindness to me may have cost you very dear.'

Wyverne was gifted with coolness and self-control

quite exceptional, but both as nearly as possible broke down at that moment. He certainly deserved infinite credit for answering, after a minute's silence, so calmly,

'Then it would be a satisfaction to you to know this? Have you any doubts on the subject?'

'Well, I suppose I ought not to have any,' Nina said, frankly. 'The engagement lasted for months after those wretched anonymous things were written, and I am sure I did all I could to set matters straight. My letter was everything that is meek and quiet and proper, was it not? And it was honest truth, too, every word of it.'

'Your letter? Yes, of course—the letter you wrote in answer to mine; but the other—the other?'

He spoke absently and almost at random, like a man half awake.

'What on earth are you talking about?' Mrs. Lenox said, with manifest impatience. 'What other letter? Did you suppose me capable of writing one other line beside that necessary reply? What have you suspected? I *will* know. Alan, I believed you more generous. You have a right to think lightly of me, and to say hard things, but not—not to insult me so cruelly.'

There were tears in the low, tremulous voice, but

none in the deep dark eyes that had dilated at first wonderingly, and were now so sad in their passionate reproach that Wyverne did not dare to meet them. He knew that Nina was capable of much that was wild and wicked, but that very recklessness made dissimulation with her simply impossible. If she had been pure and cold as St. Agnes, Alan would not have felt more certain of the truth and sincerity of her meaning and words. The fraud, that he had vaguely suspected at the time, stood out black and distinct enough now. He hated himself so intensely that for the moment all other feelings were swallowed up in self-contempt,—even to the craving for vengeance on the conspirators who had juggled him, which ever afterwards haunted him like an evil spirit. Wyverne had always cherished, you know, a simple generous faith in the dignity of womanhood; if his chivalry had carried him one step further—if, in despite of the evidence of his senses, he had refused to believe in womanhood's utter debasement—it would have been perhaps the very folly of romance; but he might have defied the forger. He took the wisest course now, by telling Nina the whole truth, as briefly and considerately as possible.

‘You see, I did you fearful wrong,’ he said. ‘Though I have paid for it heavily already, and shall suffer to my life’s end, that is no reason why you

should forgive me. I don't even ask you to do so.'

Mrs. Lenox was, indeed, bitterly incensed. A perfectly immaculate matron might have laughed such a conspiracy against her fair fame to scorn: Nina could not afford to be maligned unjustly. Nevertheless all her indignation was levelled at the unknown framer of the fraud; not a whit rested on Alan. She had been used to see people commit themselves in every conceivable way, and make the wildest sacrifices, for her sake; but she had learnt to appreciate these follies at their proper worth. Strong selfish desire and the hope of an evil reward were at the bottom of them all. Truly, when a man ruins himself simply to gratify his ruling passion, the lover deserves little more credit than the gambler. But the present case was widely different. She had not a shadow of a claim on Alan's service or forbearance. Though he seemed to see no merit in a simple act of duty, she knew right well what it had cost him to destroy the supposed evidence of her shame; and now—instead of expecting thanks—he was reproaching himself for having misjudged her while believing his own eyes. As she thought on these things, Nina's hard battered heart grew fresh and young again. Not a single unholy element mingled in the tenderness of her gratitude; but, if time and place

had not forbidden, she would scarcely have confined her demonstrations to a covert pressure of Wyverne's hand.

'Forgive you?' she said, piteously. 'It drives me wild to hear you speak so. I would give up every friend I have in the world to keep *you*. The best of them would not have done half as much for me. And we can never be friends—really. My unhappy name has dragged you down like a mill-stone; don't attempt to deceive yourself; you must hate the sound of it now and always. Ah, do try to believe me. I would submit to any pain or penance or shame, and not think it hard measure, if I could only give you back what you have lost through me.'

In despite of his exasperation, the sweet voice fell soothingly on Alan's ear. A man need not greatly glorify himself for having simply acted up to his notions of right and honour; nevertheless, appreciation in the proper quarter must be gratifying to all except the *very* superior natures. Many are left among us still who 'do good by stealth,' but the habit of 'blushing to find it known' is antiquated to a degree.

So, as he listened, Wyverne's mood softened; and he began quite naturally to play the part of consoler, trying to prove to Nina that she had been an

innocent instrument throughout, and that if the conspirators had been foiled in this instance, they would surely have found some other engine to work out the same result.

‘But it was such base, cruel treachery,’ she said, trembling with passion. ‘Will you not try to trace it, for my sake, if not for your own? You must have some suspicions. If I were a man, and could act and move freely, I should never sleep soundly till I was revenged.’

Wyverne answered very slowly, and, as he spoke, his face hardened and darkened till it might have been carved in granite.

‘You may spare the spur; there is no fear of my sleeping over it. I’m not made of wax or snow, to be moulded like this into a puppet for their profit or pleasure, and I owe you a vengeance besides. Yes, I have suspicions; I’ll make them certainties, if I live. Your never having got my note, telling you of my burning the first of the two letters, gives me a clue. They may double as they like, they wont escape, if I once fairly strike the trail. Now, we will never speak of this again till—I give you *the name*.’

The change of Alan’s character dated from that night; most of his friends noticed it before long. He was never morose or sullen, but always moody,


and absent, and pre-occupied ; without exactly avoiding society, he found himself alone, unwontedly often, and solitude did him far more harm than good. To speak the truth, his credit as a pleasant companion began sensibly to decline. A Fixed Idea, even if it be as rosy as Hope, interferes sadly with a man's social merits ; if it chance to be sombre or menacing in hue, the influence is simply fatal to conviviality.

But autumn and winter passed, and it was spring again, before Wyverne could set his foot on more solid ground than vague surmises. He felt certain that Lady Mildred had countenanced, if not directed, the plot—the note having miscarried from Dene was strong evidence—but he was equally sure that her delicate hands were clear of the soil of actual fraud. Who had been the working instrument? For a moment his thoughts turned to Max Vavasour, but he soon rejected this idea, remembering that the latter was not in England that Christmas-tide ; besides which, he could not fancy his cousin superintending the practical details of a vulgar forgery ; he would far sooner have suspected Clydesdale, but there was not the faintest reason, so far, to connect the Earl with foul play. So he went groping on, for months, in the twilight without advancing a step, growing more gloomy and discontented every day.

It was a curious chance that put him on the right scent at last.

An Inn of Court is not exactly the spot one would select for setting 'a trap to catch a sunbeam;' a wholesome amount of light and air is about as much as one can expect to find in such places; heavy, grave decorum pervades them, very fittingly; but it may be doubted if any quarter of a populous city, respectable in its outward seeming, has a right to be so depressingly dull and dingy, as is the Inn of Gray; the spiders of all sorts, who lurk thereabouts, had best not keep the flies long in their webs, or the victims would scarce be worth devouring.

Some such thoughts as these were in Wyverne's mind as he wandered through the grim quadrangle, one cold evening towards the end of March, looking for 'Humphrey and Gliddon's' chambers. The firm had an evil name; men said, that if it was difficult to find out their den, it was twice as hard to escape from it without loss of plumage. Alan's temper had certainly changed for the worse, but his good nature stood by him still; so when a comrade wrote from the country, to beg him to act as proxy in a delicate money transaction with the aforesaid attorneys, he assented very willingly, and was rather glad to have something to employ his afternoon.



He had just come up from his hunting quarters, where the dry, dusty ground rode like asphalte, and scent was a recollection of the far past.

After some trouble he lighted on the right staircase. Raw and murky as the outer atmosphere might be, it was pure æther compared to that of the low-browed office into which the visitor first entered ; at any hour or season of the year, you could fancy that room maintaining a good, steady, condensed dusk of its own, in which fog, and smoke, and dust, had about equal shares. Two clerks sat there, writing busily. The one nearest the door—a thick-set, sullen man, past middle age—looked up as Alan came in, and stretching out a grimy hand, said, in a dull, mechanical voice,

‘ Your card, sir, if you please—Sir Alan Wyverne wishes to see Mr. Humphrey.’

It was evidently the formula of reception in that ominous ante-chamber.

The other clerk had not lifted his head when the door opened ; but he started violently when he heard the name, so as nearly to upset the inkstand in which he chanced to be dipping his pen, and turned round, with a sort of terror on his haggard, ruined face. It might have been a very handsome face once, but the wrinkled, flaccid flesh had fallen away round the hollow temples and from under the

heavy eyes; the complexion was unhealthy, pale, and sodden; the features pinched and drawn, to deformity; the lines on the forehead were like trenches, and the abundant dark hair was, not sprinkled, but streaked and patched, irregularly, with grey.

But, at the first glance, Wyverne recognised the face of a very old friend; he recognised it the more easily because, when he saw it last, it wore almost the same wild, scared look—on the memorable Derby day when ‘Cloanthus’ swept past the stand, scarcely extended, the two leading favourites struggling vainly to reach his quarters.

All his self-command was needed to enable him to suppress the exclamation that sprang to his lips; but he rarely made a mistake when it was a question of tact or delicacy. He followed his conductor into the next room, silently; it chanced to be vacant at that moment; then Alan laid his hand on the clerk’s shoulder, as he stood with averted eyes, shaking like an aspen, and said, in tones carefully lowered—

‘My God! Hugh Crichton—you here?’

‘Hush,’ the other answered, in a lower whisper still; ‘that’s not my name now. You wouldn’t spoil my last chance, if you could help it? If you want to see me, wait five minutes after

you leave this place, and I'll come to you in the square.'

'I'll wait, if it's an hour,' Wyverne said, and so passed into the inner room without another word. His business was soon done; even Humphrey and Gliddon could find no pretext for detaining clients who came with money in their hand. Alan did not exchange a glance with either of the occupants of the clerks'-room as he went out; he breathed more freely when he was in the chill March air again. As he walked up and down the opposite side of the square, which was nearly deserted, his thoughts were very pitiful and sad.

Hardly a year passes without the appearance of one or more comets in society; none of these have sparkled more briefly and brilliantly than Hugh Crichton. Everybody liked, and many admired him, but the world had hardly begun to appreciate his rare and versatile talents, when he shot down into the outer darkness. He had friends who would have helped him if they could, but all trace of him was lost, and none could say for certain whether he lived or no.

Wyverne had not waited many minutes, when a bent, shrunken figure came creeping slowly, almost stealthily, towards him, keeping well in the shadow of the buildings. In another moment, Alan was

grasping both his ancient comrade's hands, with a cordial, honest gripe, that might have put heart and hope into the veriest castaway.

'Dear old Hugh ! how glad I am to light on you again, though you are so fearfully changed. Why, they said you had died abroad.'

'No such luck,' the other answered, with a dreary laugh. 'I did go abroad, and stayed there till I was nearly starved ; then I came back. London's the best hiding-place, after all ; and if you have hands and brain, you can always earn enough to buy bread, and spirits, and tobacco. I've been in this place more than a year ; I get a pound a-week ; and I think of 'striking' soon, for an advance of five shillings. They wont lose me if they can help it ; I save them a clerk, at least ; old Gliddon never asked me another question after he saw me write a dozen lines. My work is all in-doors, that's one comfort ; they haven't asked me to serve a writ yet ; my senior—you saw him—the man with a strong cross of the bull about his head—does all that business, and likes it. But the firm don't trust me much, and they would be more unpleasant still, if they knew 'Henry Carstairs' was a false name. No one has much interest now in hunting me down ; it's old friends' faces I've always been afraid of meeting. But I did think that none of our lot

would ever set foot in that den, and I had got to fancy myself safe. You didn't come on your own affairs, Alan, I know. I had an extra grog the night I heard you had fallen in for Castle Dacre. I rather think I am glad to see you, after all.'

He jerked out the sentences in a nervous, abrupt way, perpetually glancing round, as if he were afraid of being watched; he was so manifestly ill-at-ease that Wyverne had not the heart to keep him there; besides, it was cruelty to expose the emaciated frame, so thinly clad, a minute longer than was necessary, to the keen evening air.

'Why, Hugh, of course you're glad to see me,' Alan said, forcing himself to speak cheerily; 'the idea of doubting about it! But it's too cold to stand chattering here. I'm staying at the Clarendon: you'll come at seven, sharp, wont you? We'll dine in my rooms, quite alone, and have a long talk about old days, and new ones, too. I'll have thought of something better for you by that time, than this infernal quill-driving.'

Hugh Crichton hesitated visibly for a few seconds, and appeared to make up his mind, with a sudden effort, to something not altogether agreeable.

'Thank you; you're very good, Alan. Yes, I'll come, the more because I've something on my mind that I ought to tell you; but I should never have

had the pluck to look you up, if you had not found me. I hope your character at the Clarendon can stand a shock ; it will be compromised when they hear such a scarecrow ask for your rooms. I can't stay a moment longer, but I'll be punctual.'

He crept away with the same weak, stealthy step, and his head seemed bent down lower than when he came.

Nevertheless, when, at the appointed hour, the guest sat down opposite his host, the contrast was not so very striking. The office-drudge was scarcely recognisable ; he seemed to freshen and brighten up wonderfully, in an atmosphere that had once been congenial. Even so, those bundles of dried twigs that Eastern travellers bring home, and enthusiasts call 'Roses of Sharon' (such Roses !) expand under the influence of warmth and moisture, so as to put forth the feeble semblance of a flower. The black suit was terribly threadbare, and hung loosely round the shrunken limbs, but it adapted itself to the wearer's form, with the easy, careless grace for which Hugh Crichton's dress had always been remarkable ; his necktie was still artistic in its simplicity, and the hair swept over his brow with the old classic wave ; his demeanour bore no trace of a sojourn in Alsatia, and a subtle refinement of manner and gesture clung naturally to the wreck of a gallant

gentleman. Some plants, you know—not the meanest nor the least fragrant—flourish more kindly in the crevices of a ruin than in the richest loam.

It was a pleasant dinner, on the whole, though not a very lively one; for Alan had too much tact to force conviviality. Crichton ate sparingly, but drank deep; he did not gulp down his liquor, though, greedily, but rather savoured it with a slow enjoyment, suffering his palate to appreciate every shade of the flavour; the long, satisfied sigh that he could not repress as he set down empty the first beaker of dry champagne, spoke volumes.

They drew up to the fire when the table was cleared, and they were left alone. Wyverne rose suddenly, and leant over towards his companion with a velvet cigar-case in his hand, that he had just taken from the mantelpiece.

‘You must tell me your story of the last few years,’ he said; ‘but put that case in your pocket before you begin. There are some regalias in it, of the calibre you used to fancy, and—a couple of hundreds, in notes, to go on with. You dear, silly old Hugh! Don’t shake your head and look scrupulous. Why, I won thrice as much of you at *écarté* in the week before that miserable Derby, and you never asked for your revenge. You should have it now if either you or I were in cue for play.

Seriously—I want you to feel at ease before you begin to talk ; I want you to feel that your troubles are over, and that you never need go near that awful *guet-à-pens* again. I've got a permanent arrangement in my head, that will suit you, I hope, and set you right for ever and a day. Hugh, you know if our positions were reversed, I should ask you for help just as frankly as I expect you will take it from me.'

Crichton shivered all over, worse than he had done out in the cold March evening.

'Put the case down,' he said, hoarsely. 'It will be time enough to talk about that and your good intentions half-an-hour hence. I'll tell you what I have been doing, if you care to hear.'

Now though the story interested Wyverne sincerely, it would be simple cruelty to inflict it on you ; with very slight variations, it might have applied to half the *viveurs* that have been ruined during the last hundred years. Still, not many men could have listened unmoved to such a tale, issuing from the lips of an ancient friend. When he had come to a certain point in his story, the speaker paused abruptly,

'Poor Hugh !' Alan said. 'How you must have suffered. Take breath now ; I'm certain your throat wants moistening, and the claret has been waiting

on you this quarter of an hour. It's my turn to speak; I'm impatient to tell you my plan. The agent at Castle Dacre is so wonderfully old and rheumatic, that it makes one believe in miracles when he climbs on the back of his pony. I would give anything to have a decent excuse for pensioning him off. I shall never live there much, and the property is so large, that it ought to be properly looked after. If you don't mind taking care of a very dreary old house, there's £800 a year, and unlimited lights and coals (they used to burn about ten tons a week, I believe), and all the snipe and fowl you like to shoot, waiting for you. I shall be the obliged party if you'll take it; for it will ease my conscience, which at present is greatly troubled. The work is not hard, and you've head enough for anything.'

Not pleasure or gratitude, but rather vexation and confusion, showed themselves in Crichton's face.

'Can't you have patience?' he muttered, irritably. 'Didn't I ask you to wait till you had heard all? There's more, and worse, to tell; though I don't know, yet, how much harm was done.'

He went on to say, that about the time when things were at the worst with him, he had stumbled upon Harding Knowles; they had been cotemporaries at Oxford, and rather intimate. Harding did

not appear to rejoice much at the encounter; though he must have guessed at the first glance the strait to which his old acquaintance was reduced, he made no offer of prompt assistance, but asked for Crichton's address, expressing vague hopes of being able to do something for him; Hugh gave it with great reluctance, and only under a solemn promise of secrecy. He did not the least expect that Knowles would remember him, and was greatly surprised when the latter called some five or six weeks afterwards. Harding's tone was much more cordial than it had been at their first meeting; he seemed really sorry at having failed so far in finding anything that would suit Crichton, and actually pressed him to borrow £10—or more if it was required—to meet present emergencies. An instinctive suspicion almost made Hugh refuse the loan; he felt as if he would rather be indebted to any man alive than to the person who offered it; but he was so fearfully 'hard up' that he had not the courage to decline. Knowles came again and again, with no ostensible object except cheering his friend's solitude, and each time was ready to open his purse. 'We must get you something before long, and then you can repay me,' he would say. Crichton availed himself of these offers more than once, moderately; he began to think that he had done his benefactor

great injustice, and looked for his visits eagerly ; indeed, few *causeurs*, when he chose to exert himself, could talk more brilliantly and pleasantly than Knowles.

One evening the conversation turned, apparently by chance, to old memories of college days.

‘That was the best managed thing we ever brought off,’ Harding said, at last, ‘when we made Alick Drummond carry on a regular correspondence with a foreign lady of the highest rank, who was madly in love with him. How did we christen the Countess? I forget. But I remember the letters you wrote for her; the delicate feminine character was the most perfect thing I ever saw. Have you lost that talent of imitating handwriting? It must have been a natural gift; I never saw it equalled.’

‘Write down a sentence or two,’ Hugh replied; ‘I’ll show you if I have lost the knack.’

He copied them out on two similar sheets of paper, and gave the three to Knowles after confusing them under the table: the latter actually started, and the admiration that he displayed was quite sincere: the *fac similes*, indeed, were so miraculously like the original, that it was next to impossible to distinguish them.

‘I can guess what is coming,’ Alan whispered

softly, seeing the speaker pause. 'Go on straight and quick to the end, for God's love, and keep nothing back. Don't look at me.'

The white working lips had no need to say more: the other saw the whole truth directly. He clenched his hand with a savage curse, but Alan's sad deprecating eyes checked the passionate outbreak of remorse and anger. Sullenly and reluctantly—like a spirit forced by the exorcist to reveal the secrets of his prison-house—Hugh Crichton went through all the miserable details.

Knowles had represented himself as being on such very intimate terms with Wyverne, as fully to justify him in attempting a practical joke.

'Alan's the best fellow in the world,' he said, airily, 'but he believes that it is impossible to take him in about womankind. There's the finest possible chance just now, and it can be managed so easily, if you will only help me.'

Hugh's natural delicacy and sense of honour, dulled and weakened by drink and degradation, had life enough left to revolt suspiciously. But the other brought to bear pretexts and arguments, specious enough to have deluded a stronger intellect and quieted a keener conscience: he particularly insisted on the point that the lady's character could bear being compromised, and that the secret would

never go beyond Alan and himself. Hugh had to contend, besides, against a sense of heavy obligation, and the selfish fear of offending the only friend that was left to back him. Of course, eventually he consented. The next morning Harding brought a specimen of the handwriting—a long and perfectly insignificant note, with the signature torn off—he was a great collector of autographs): he was also provided with paper and envelopes, both marked with a cipher, which he took pains to conceal. Crichton could not be sure of the initials, but he caught a glimpse of their colour—a brilliant scarlet. The tone of the fictitious letter, though the expressions were guardedly vague, seemed strangely earnest for a mere mystification; certainly an intimate acquaintance was implied between the writer and the person to whom it was addressed. The copyist was more than half dissatisfied; he grumbled a good many objections while employed on his task, and was very glad when it was over. The signature was simply 'N.,' an initial which occurred more than once in the specimen note, so that it was easy to reproduce a very peculiar wavy flourish. The imitation was a masterpiece, and Knowles was profuse of thanks and praises.

He did not allude to the matter more than once during the next few weeks, and then only to remark,

in a careless casual way, that the plot was going on swimmingly. This struck Crichton as rather odd ; neither the pleasure of Knowles's society nor the comparative luxuries which liberal advances supplied, could keep him from feeling very uncomfortable at times. One morning, late in December, a note came, begging him to dine with Harding that night in the Temple ; the writer was ' going into the country almost immediately.'

It was a very succulent repast, and poor Hugh, as was his wont, drank largely: nevertheless, when, late in the evening, Knowles asked him to repeat his caligraphic feat, and showed the draft of a letter, it became evident, even to his clouded brain, that something more than ' merry mischief' was intended. At first he refused flatly and rudely. Indeed, any rational being, unless very far gone in drink or self-delusion, must have suspected foul play. Not only was the tone of the letter passionate to a degree, but it contained allusions of real grave import ; and one name was actually mentioned—Helen Vavasour's. Knowles was playing his grand *coup*, and necessarily had to risk something. He was not at all disconcerted at the resistance he encountered ; he had a plausible explanation ready to meet every objection. ' He was going down to Dene the next day, on purpose to enjoy the *dénouement* ; it would be such

a pity to spoil it now. Miss Vavasour was a cousin who had known Alan from her infancy ; she would appreciate the trick as well as any one ; but, of course, she was never to know of it. This was the very last time he would ask his friend's help.' So the tempter went on, alternately ridiculing and cajoling Hugh's scruples, all the while drenching him with strong liquor : at length he prevailed.

Crichton was one of those men whose hand and eye, often to their own detriment, will keep steady when their brain is whirling. He executed his task with a mechanical perfection, though he was scarcely aware of the meaning of each sentence as he wrote it down. Knowles took possession of the letter as soon as it was done, and locked it up carefully.

The revel became an orgie : the last thing that Hugh remembered distinctly was—marking a devilish satisfaction on his companion's crafty face, that made his own blood boil. After that everything was chaos. He had a vague recollection of having tried to get back the letter—of high words and a serious quarrel—even of a blow exchanged ; but the impressions were like those left by a painful nightmare. He woke from a long heavy stupor, such as undrugged liquor could scarcely produce, and found himself on a door-step in his own street, without a notion of how he had got there, subject to the attentions of a

benevolent policeman, who would not allow him to enjoy, undisturbed, 'a lodging upon the cold ground.' The next day came a curt contemptuous note from Harding Knowles, to say 'that he was glad to have been of some assistance to an old friend, and that he should never expect repayment of his advances; but that nothing would induce him to risk a repetition of the painful scene of last night.' They had never met since. Crichton was constantly haunted with the idea of having been an accessory to some base villany; and would have communicated his suspicions, long ago, to Wyverne, if it had not been for the false pride which made him keep aloof from all ancient acquaintance, as if he had been plague-stricken.

Alan sat perfectly quiet and silent, till the other had finished, only betraying emotion by a convulsive twisting of the fingers that shaded his eyes. All at once he broke out into a harsh bitter laugh.

'You thought it was a practical joke? So it was—a very practical one, and right well played out. Do you know what it cost me? The hope and happiness of my life—that's all. Why, if I were to drain that lying hound's blood, drop by drop, he would be in my debt still!'

Then his head sank on his crossed arms, and he began to murmur to himself—so piteously—

‘ Ah, my Helen ! my lost Helen !’

The beaten-down, degraded look possessed the castaway’s face stronger than ever.

‘ Didn’t I ask you to wait till I had told you all?’ he muttered. ‘ I knew how it would be ; that was why I hesitated to accept your invitation to-day. Let me go now ; I cannot comfort you nor help you either. You meant kindly though, old friend, and I thank you all the same. Good-bye.’

Alan lifted his head quickly. His eyes were not angry—only inexpressibly sad.

‘ Sit down, Hugh,’ he said, ‘ and don’t be hasty. You might give one a moment’s breathing-time after a blow like that. I haven’t spirits enough for argument, much less for quarrelling. I know well if you had been in your sober senses, and had thought it would really harm me, no earthly bribe would have tempted you to pen one line. You *can* help me very much ; and I will trust you so far, from the bottom of my heart ; as for comfort—I must trust to God. I hold to every word of my offers. I am so very glad I made them before I heard all this ; for I can ask you to serve me now without your suspecting a bribe.’

Length of misery tames stoicism as it crushes better feelings : a spirit nearly broken yields easily to weakness that would shame hearts inexperienced

in sorrow. The pride of manhood could not check the big drops that wetted Crichton's hollow cheeks before Wyverne had finished speaking.

They talked long and seriously that night. Alan did not trust by halves; he forced himself to go into every detail that it was necessary the other should know, though some words and names seemed to burn his lips in passing. Before they parted their plan was fully arranged. Hugh was to resign his clerkship at once, so as to devote himself exclusively to completing the chain of proofs that would criminate at least the main movers in the plot. Alan clung persistently to the idea that Clydesdale had a good deal to do with it.

It is needless to say that the amateur detective worked with all his heart, and soul, and strength. His temperance was worthy of an anchorite; and, when he kept his senses about him, Crichton could be as patient and keen-scented as the most practised of legal blood-hounds. Before a week was over, he had collected evidence, conclusive and consecutive enough to have convinced any Court of Honour, though perhaps it would not have secured a verdict from those free and enlightened Britons who will make a point of acquitting any murderer that does not chance to be caught 'red-handed.' Truly ours is a noble Constitution, and the Trial by Jury is one

of its fairest pillars; but I have heard a paragon Judge speak blasphemy thereanent. If the Twelve were allowed the French latitude of finding 'extenuating circumstances,' I believe the coolest on the Bench would go distraught, in helpless wrath and contempt.

Wyverne knew the shop that Mrs. Lenox patronized for *papeterie*. They ascertained there that a man answering exactly to the description of Knowles had called, one day in that autumn, and had asked for a packet of her envelopes and note-paper, stating that he was commissioned to take them down into the country, and producing one of the lady's cards as a credential. The stationer particularly remembered it from the fact of the purchase having been paid for on the spot. Trifling as the amount was—only a few shillings—it was a curious infraction of Nina's commercial system, which was, as a rule, consistently Pennsylvanian. Crichton had certainly contracted no new friendships during his office-servitude, but he had made a few acquaintances at some of the haunts frequented nightly by revellers of the clerkly guild. He worked one of these engines of information very effectually. Harding had more than once given him a cheque to a small amount, which he had got cashed through one of the subordinates of the bank, whom he had chanced to

fraternize with at the 'Cat and Compasses,' or some such reputable hostel. At the expense of much persuasion, and a timely advance to the official, whose convivial habits were getting him into difficulties, Hugh was in a position to prove that Knowles had paid into his account, early in the January following that eventful Christmas, a cheque for £5000, signed by Lord Clydesdale. The money remained standing to his credit for some time, but had since been drawn out for investment. The dates of the composition of the fictitious letters corresponded exactly with the times at which Alan had received them.

Altogether, the case seemed tolerably clear, and a net of proof was drawn round Harding Knowles that it would puzzle even his craft to escape from.

I do not enter into the question whether the influences of high Civilization are sanctifying, or the reverse; but on some grounds, it surely ought to improve our Christianity, if it were only for the obstacles standing in the path of certain pagan propensities. One would think that even an infidel might see the folly of letting the sun go down on futile wrath. In truth, nowadays, the prosecution of a purely personal and private vengeance is not alone immoral in itself, but exceedingly difficult to carry out. You cannot go forth and smite your enemy

under the fifth rib, wheresoever you may meet, after the simple antique fashion. You must lure him across the Channel before you can even proceed after the formula of the polite *duello*—supposing always that the adversary had not infringed the criminal code.

Alan Wyverne's nature was not sublime enough to admit a thought of forgiveness, now. Since he held the instruments of retaliation in his hand, he had never faltered for one moment in his vindictive purpose; but—how best to complete it?—was a problem over which he brooded gloomily for hours, without touching the solution.

CHAPTER IX.

AN OLD SCORE PAID.

IT is needless to explain, that on Harding Knowles Wyverne's anger was chiefly concentrated. Clydesdale came in for his share; but, so far, it was difficult to establish the extent of the Earl's connexion with the plot. When the Divine warning, 'Vengeance is Mine,' has once been ignored, very few men are so cold-blooded, as to exclude entirely from their plan of retribution the old simple method of exacting it with their own right hand. As Alan sat thinking, a vision would rise before him, dangerously attractive: he saw a waste of sand-hills stretching for leagues along the coast of France; so remote from road or dwelling, that a shot would never be heard unless it were by a stray fishing-boat out at sea; so seldom traversed, that the body of a murdered man might lie there for days undiscovered, unless the gathering birds told tales; he saw the form of his enemy standing up in relief against the

clear morning-light, within a dozen paces of the muzzle of his pistol. I fear it was more the impracticability of the idea than its sinfulness, which made Alan decide that it ought to be relinquished. Sometimes it needs no great casuistry to enable even the best-natured of us to give, in our own minds, a verdict of Justifiable Homicide. But upon calm consideration, it was about a million to one against Harding's being induced to risk himself in a duel, which he might guess would be to the death, where the chances would be heavily against him. As a rule, forgers don't fight.


There were great difficulties, too, about a public exposure—so great that Alan never really entertained the idea for a moment. He would just as soon have thought of publishing a scurrilous libel about those whom he loved best, as of allowing their names to be paraded for the world's amusement and criticism.

While he was still in doubt and perplexity, he chanced to meet one morning a famous physician, with whom he was rather intimate, though he had never employed him professionally. Dr. Eglinton was a general favourite; many people, besides his patients, liked to hear his full cheery tones, and to see his quaint pleasant face, with the *fin sourire* that pointed his inexhaustible anecdotes; he was the

most inveterate gossip that ever steered quite clear of ill-nature.

‘You’re not looking in such rude health as one would expect at the end of the hunting season,’ the Doctor said, ‘but I suppose there’s ‘nothing in my way this morning.’ I wish I could say as much for an old friend of yours, whom I have just left at the Burlington. It’s the Rector of Dene. By the bye, it would be a great charity if you would call on him to-day : he seems lonely and out of spirits—indeed, the nature of his disease is depressing. I know he’s very fond of you, and you might do him more good than my physic can. I fear it is a hopeless case—a heart-complaint of some standing—though the symptoms have only become acute and aggravated within the last two years. Do you know if he has had any great domestic troubles or worries of late? He was not communicative, and I did not dare to press him. Nothing can be so bad for him as anything of the sort ; and any heavy or sudden shock might be instantly fatal.’

It was not only surprise and pain, but sharp self-reproach too, that made Wyverne turn so pale. Revenge is essentially selfish, even when it will reason at all ; he had actually forgotten his kind old friend’s existence while pondering how to punish his son. He knew right well, what had been the great



trouble that had weighed on Gilbert Knowles's heart for the last two years. The Rector was of course unable to intercede or avert the catastrophe; but, when he heard of the final rupture of Helen's engagement, he bowed his head despairingly, and had never raised it since. I told you how he loved her, and how sincerely he liked Alan. On their union rested the last of his hopes; when that was crushed, he felt he should never have strength or spirits enough to nourish another.

No wonder Wyverne's reply was strangely embarrassed and inconsequent:

'I don't know—yes—perhaps there may have been some trouble on his mind. The dear old Rector! I wish I had heard of this before. Of course I'll go to him; but not to-day—it's impossible to-day. Good-bye: I shall see you again very soon. I shall want to hear about your patient.'

His manner, usually *posé* to a degree, was so abrupt just then, that it set the Doctor musing as he walked away.

'There's something wrong there,' he muttered, half aloud (it was a way he had); 'I wish I knew what it was; he's well worth curing. He's not half the man he was when he was ruined. None of us are, for that matter: I suppose there's something bracing in the air of poverty. I did hear some-

thing about a cousinly attachment, but it can't be that: Wyverne is made of too sterling stuff to pine away because an *amourette* goes wrong: besides, he's always with Lady Clydesdale now, they say. What *don't* they say, if one had only time to listen,' &c. &c.

The good physician had a little subdued element of cynicism in his nature, which he only indulged when soliloquizing, or over the one cigar that professional decorum winked at, when the long day's toil was done.

'Not to-day.' No; Alan felt that it would be impossible to meet the father, till the interview with the son was over. He went back to his rooms, and sat there thinking for a full hour. Then he took some papers from a locked casket, and went straight to the Temple.

Knowles's servant chanced to be out, so he came himself to open the door of his chambers. He was prosperous and careful, you know, and could meet the commercial world boldly, abroad or at home; but the most timorous of insolvents never felt so disagreeable a thrill at the apparition of the sternest of creditors, as shot through Harding's nerves when he saw on the threshold, the calm courteous face of the man whom he disliked and feared beyond all living. There was something in that face—though,

a careless observer would have detected no ruffle in its serenity—that stopped the other in his greeting, and in the act of offering his hand. Not a word passed between the two, till Knowles had followed his visitor into the innermost of the two sitting-rooms, closing the doors carefully behind them. Then Wyverne spoke—

‘An old friend of mine has given me a commission to do. I had better get through that before coming to my own business. You advanced several sums to Hugh Crichton at different times, lately; will you be good enough to say, if that list of them is right?’

There could not be a more striking proof of how completely Knowles’ nerves were unstrung, than the fact, that he looked at the paper without having a notion as to the correctness of the items, and without the faintest interest in the question. He answered quite at random, speaking quick and confusedly—

‘Yes, they are quite right; but it doesn’t in the least matter. I never expected——’

‘Pardon me,’ Alan interrupted, ‘it does matter very much—to us. Perhaps since you have become a capitalist, you can afford to be careless of such trifles. Hugh Crichton does not think it a trifle to owe money to you. Here is the exact sum, as far

as he can remember it. It is your own fault if you have cheated yourself. I will not trouble you for a receipt. I dare say you did not expect to be paid, still less by my hand. That is settled. Now I will talk about my own affairs.'

Though he spoke so quietly, there was a subtle contempt in his tone, that made every word fall like a lash. Again and again, Harding tried to meet the steady look of the cold grave eyes, and failed each time signally. He tried bluster, thus early in the interview, in sheer despair.

'I can't guess at your object, but your manner is not to be mistaken. It is evident you come here with the deliberate purpose of insulting me. I'm afraid I must disappoint you, Sir Alan. I decline to enter into your own affairs at all, and I consider our conversation ended here.'

The other laughed scornfully, and his accent became harder and more *trenchant* than ever.

'Bah!—you lose your head! There are two gross errors in that last speech. I don't come to insult, because, to insult a person, you must presume he has some title to self-respect. I utterly deny your right to such a thing. And you will listen as long as I chose to speak; you may be sure I shall not use an unnecessary word. I come here to make certain accusations and to impose certain

conditions—or penalties, if you like. It's not worth while picking expressions.'

Harding sat down, actually gnashing his teeth in impotent rage, leaning his elbows on his knees, and resting his chin on his clenched hands.

'Go on, then,' he snarled, 'and be quick about it.'

'I accuse you,' Alan answered, steadily, 'of having played the part of a common spy; of having composed, if you did not write, two anonymous letters to Lady Mildred and her daughter; afterwards, of having maligned a woman whom you never spoke to, by causing her handwriting to be forged; of having made a dear friend of mine, a gentleman of birth and breeding, unwittingly your accomplice, when he was brought so low that the Tempter himself might have spared him; of having done me, and perhaps my cousin, a mortal injury, when neither of us had ever hurt you by word or deed. I accuse you of having done all this for hire, for the specific sum of £5000, paid you by Lord Clydesdale within a month after your villany was consummated. You need not trouble yourself to contradict one syllable of this, unless you choose to lie for the pleasure of lying. I have the written proofs here.'

Knowles's head went down lower and lower while

Wyverne was speaking; when he raised his face, it was fantastically convulsed and horribly livid, like one of those that we see in the illustrations to the *Inferno*, besetting the path of the travellers through the penal Circles. He was too anxious to escape from his torture, to protract it by a single vain denial; but he would not throw one chance of palliation away.

‘It was not a bribe,’ he gasped out, ‘it was a regular bet. Look, I can show it you.’

He drew his tablets out and tore them open with a shaking hand; and, after finding the page with great difficulty, pointed it out to Wyverne.

The latter just glanced at the entry, and cast down the book with a gesture of crushing contempt.

‘Five thousand to fifty,’ he said; ‘I’ve been long enough on the turf to construe those odds. The veriest robber in the ring would not have dared to show your ‘regular bet.’ Now, answer me one question—How far was Clydesdale cognizant of your plot?’

‘He has never heard one word of it, up to this moment,’ the other answered, eagerly. ‘I swear it. You may make any inquiries you like. I *can* defy you there. But some one else did know of it, and approved it too; that was——’

Wyverne’s tone changed savagely as he broke in.

'*Will* you confine yourself to answering the questions you are asked? I don't want any confessions volunteered. I attach no real importance to them, after all; but it grates on one, to hear people maligned unnecessarily. Now, I'll tell you what I mean to do about it. I thought at first of inducing you to cross the Channel, and giving you a chance for your life against mine there; but I gave that up, because—I knew you wouldn't come. Then I thought—a brutal, last resource—of beating you into a cripple—here. I gave that up, because I never could thrash a dog that lay down at the first cut, writhing and howling; I know so well that would have been your line. Do you want to say anything?'

A sudden change in Harding's countenance made Alan pause. You may have seen how utterly deficient he was both in moral and physical courage; but the last faint embers of manhood smouldered into sullen flame, under the accumulation of insult. He had risen to his feet with a dark devilish malice on his face, and made a step towards a table near him.


Wyverne's keen gaze read his purpose thoroughly, but never wavered in its freezing contempt.

'Ah, that's the drawer where you keep your revolver,' he said. 'If you drive a rat into a corner, he *will* turn sometimes. I don't believe you would

have nerve to shoot ; but I mean to run no risks. I came prepared after I gave up the bastinado. There's something heavier than wood in this malacca. I'll break your wrist if you attempt to touch the lock. That's better ; sit down again and listen. Then—I thought of bringing the matter before a committee of every club you belong to, suppressing all the names but my own. I could have done it ; my credit's good for so much, if I choose to use it. I only gave up that idea three hours ago. It was when I heard of the Rector's being so seriously ill. The fathers suffer for the sins of the children often enough ; but I have not the heart to give *yours* his death-blow. You will appreciate the weakness thoroughly, I don't doubt. On one condition I shall keep your treachery a secret from all, except those immediately concerned ; that condition is—that you never show yourself in any company where, by the remotest chance, you could meet either Lady Clydesdale, Mrs. Lenox, any of the Dene family, or myself. I'll do my duty to society so far, at all events. Do you accept or refuse ?'

'I have no choice,' the other muttered, hoarsely and sullenly ; 'you have me in a vice, you know that.'

'Then it is so understood,' Wyverne went on. 'You needn't waste breath in promising or swearing.'



'You'll keep your quarantine, I feel sure. If not——' (it was a very significant pause). 'After all, my forbearance only hangs on your poor father's life, and I fear that is a slender thread indeed.'

The mention of Gilbert Knowles's name seemed to have no effect whatever upon his son; he did not even appear grateful for its mute intercession between him and public shame: but Alan's tone softened insensibly as he uttered it. When he spoke again, after a minute's silence, his tone was rather sad than scornful.

'If you wanted money so much, why, in God's name, did you not come to me? I would have sold my last chance of a reversion, and have begged or borrowed from every friend I had, sooner than have let Clydesdale outbid me. The plunge was taken, when you could once think of such infamy: you might as well have sold yourself to me. Those miserable thousands must have been your only motive, for you had no reason, that I know of, to dislike me.'

For the first time since the interview began, Harding Knowles looked the speaker straight in the eyes: his face was still white as a corpse's, but its expression was scarcely human in its intense malignity.

‘You’re wrong,’ he said, between his teeth: ‘the money wasn’t the only motive. Not dislike you! Curse you!—I’ve hated you from the first moment that we met. Do you fancy, I thank you for your forbearance now? I’d poison you if I could, or murder you where you stand, if I dared. I hated your languid ways, and your quiet manner, and your soft speech, and your cool courtesy—hated them all. You never spoke naturally but once—on the hall-steps of Dene. Do you suppose I’ve forgotten that, or the look in your cousin’s eyes? I tell you, I hated you both. I felt you despised and laughed at me all the while, and you had no right to do so—then. It is different—different—now.’


His brain, usually so calculating and crafty, for the moment was utterly distraught; he could not even command his voice, which rose almost into a shriek while he was speaking, and in the last words sank abruptly into a hollow groan. It was a terrible and piteous sight. But you have heard how implacable at certain seasons Alan Wyverne could be; neither the agony of the passion, nor the misery of the humiliation, moved his compassion in the least: he watched the outbreak and the relapse, with a smile of serene satisfaction that had been strange to his face for some time past.

‘So you really disliked my manner?’ he said, in

his own slow, pensive way. 'I remember, years ago, an ancient Duchesse of the Faubourg telling me it had a savour of the *Vieille Cour*. I was intensely flattered then, for I was very young. I am not sure that I ought not to be more gratified now. I think I am. The instincts of hate are truer than those of love. Mde. de Latréaumont was as kind as a mother to me, and might have been deceived. I have no more to say. You know the conditions: if you transgress them by a hair's-breadth, you will hear of it—not from me.'

He left the room without another word. It is doubtful if Knowles heard that last taunt, or knew that his visitor was gone. He had buried his face again in his hands; and so, for minutes, sat motionless. All at once he started up, went to the outer 'oak,' and dropped the bolt which made his servant's pass-key useless, and then returned to his old seat, still apparently half stunned and stupefied.


Do you think the forger and traitor escaped easily? It may be so; but remember the exaggerated importance that Harding attached to his social position and advancement. I believe that many, whose earthly ruin has just been completed, have felt less miserable, and hopeless, and spirit-broken, than the man who sate there, far into the twilight,



staring at the fire with haggard eyes, that never saw the red coals turn grey.

It is true, that when Nina Lenox heard from Alan a *résumé* of the day's proceedings, she decided at once that the retribution was wholly inadequate and unsatisfactory. But one need not multiply instances to prove the truism—if women are exacting in love, they are thrice as exacting in revenge. I cannot remember where I read the old romaunt, of the knight who came just in time to save his lady from the burning, by vanquishing her traducer in the lists. The story is commonplace and trite to a degree. I only remember the one incident that made it remarkable. The conqueror stood with his foot on the neck of the enemy; his chivalrous heart melted towards the vanquished, who, after all, had done his devoir gallantly in an evil cause. He would have suffered him to rise and live; but he chanced to glance inquiringly towards the pale woman at the stake, and, says the chronicler, 'by the bending of her brows, and the blink of her eyes, he wist that she bade him—'not spare!'' So the good knight sighed heavily, and, turning his sword-point once more to the neck of the fallen man, drove the keen steel through mail and flesh and bone.

Ah, my friend! may it never be your lot or mine, to lie prone at the mercy of a woman whom we have



wronged past hope of forgiveness ; be sure, that eyes and brows will speak as plainly as they did a thousand years ago, and their murderous message will be much the same.

CHAPTER X.

DIPLOMACY AT A DISCOUNT.

IT would be rather difficult to define Wyverne's feelings after his interview with Knowles. I fear that the utter humiliation of his enemy failed entirely to satisfy him; but, on the whole, I think he scarcely regretted not having pushed reprisals to extremities. At least there was this advantage; he could sit with the Rector, now, for hours, and strive to cheer the poor invalid, with a quiet conscience; he could never have borne to come into his presence with the deliberate purpose at his heart of bringing public shame on Gilbert's son.

At the beginning of the following week, Alan heard that the Squire and Lady Mildred were in town for a couple of days, on their way home from Devonshire. He knew the hour at which he was certain to find 'my lady' alone, and timed his visit accordingly. Now, though the family breach had been closed up long ago, and though Wyverne

was with Lady Clydesdale perpetually, apparently on the most cousinly terms of intimacy, it somehow happened that he met his aunt very seldom. Still, it was the most natural thing that he should call, under the circumstances, and 'my lady' was in no wise disconcerted when his name was announced. The greeting, on both sides, was as affectionate as it had ever been in the old times; it would have been impossible to say why, from the first, Lady Mildred felt a nervous presentiment of impending danger, unless it was—it might have been pure fancy—that Alan's manner did seem unusually grave. So she was not surprised when he said,

'Would you mind putting off your drive for half an hour? I will not keep you longer; but I have one or two things that I wish very much to say to you.'

'I'll give you the whole afternoon, if you wish it, Alan,' she said, in the softest of her silky tones; 'it is no great sacrifice; I shall be glad of an excuse for escaping the cold wind. Will you ring, and tell them I shall not want the carriage, and that I am not at home to anybody?'

So once again—this time without a witness—the trial of fence between those two began; it was strange, but all the prestige of previous victories could not make 'my lady' feel confident, now.

Alan broke ground boldly, without wasting time in 'parades.'

'Aunt Mildred, if some things that I have to refer to should be painful to you, try and realize what they must be to *me*; you will see, then, that only necessity could make me speak. Do you remember, when those wretched anonymous letters first came to Dene, I told you I would find out their author, and thank him? I did both, last week. More than this, I have seen and spoken with the man who wrote those letters, which we all supposed came from Mrs. Rawdon Lenox. You never had a doubt on the subject, of course, Aunt Mildred? I thought you would be surprised; you will be still more so when you hear the forger's name—Harding Knowles.'

'My lady' really *did* suffer from headaches sometimes—with that busy, restless brain it was no wonder—and she always had near her the strongest smelling-salts that could be procured; but she did not know what fainting meant, so she was absolutely terrified, when the room seemed to go round, and Wyverne's voice sounded distant and strange, as if it came through a long speaking-tube; the sensation passed off in a few seconds, but while it lasted she could only feel, blindly and helplessly, for the jewelled vinaigrette which lay within a few inches of

her elbow. Wyverne's eyes had never left her face for a moment; he caught up the bottle quickly and put it, open, into her hand without a word.

'It—it is—nothing,' Lady Mildred gasped (the salts must have been *very* pungent). 'I have not been well for days; the surprise quite overcame me. But oh, Alan, are you quite—quite sure? I don't like Harding Knowles much; but it would be too cruel to accuse him of such horrors, unless you have certain proofs.'

'Make yourself easy on that score,' Alan said, with his quiet smile; 'no injustice has been done. I will give you all the proofs you care to see, directly. While you recover yourself, Aunt Mildred, let me tell you a short story. Years ago, when we were cruising about the Orkneys, they showed us a certain cliff that stood up a thousand feet clear out of the North Sea, and told us what happened there. A father and his son, sea-fowlers, were hanging on the same rope, the father undermost. Suddenly they found that the strands were parting one by one, frayed on a sharp edge of rock. The rope might possibly carry one to the top—not two. Then quoth the sire, 'Your mother must not starve—cut away, *below*.' As he said, so was it done, and the parricide got up safely. Do you see my meaning? You say you don't like Harding Knowles? I can

well believe it; but if you cared for him next to your own children, I should still quote the stout Orkneyman's words—'cut away *below*.' Now, if you will look at these papers, you will see how clear the evidence is on which I rely.'

There was silence for some minutes, while 'my lady' pretended to read attentively; in real truth, she could not fix her attention to a line. All her thoughts were concentrated on the one doubt—'How much does he know?' The suspense became unendurable; it was better to hear the worst at once. Suddenly she looked up and spoke.

'Is it possible? Can you believe that Clydesdale was mixed up with such a plot as this?'

'No,' Wyverne answered, frankly. 'I confess I did suspect him at first; but I don't believe, now, that he was privy to any of the details. I think, after securing his agent's services, he left him *carte blanche* to act as he would. He is quite welcome to that shade of difference in the dishonour. Well—are those proofs satisfactory? If not, I may tell you that I saw Harding Knowles four days ago, and that he confesses everything.'

The peculiar intonation of the last two words made Lady Mildred, once more, feel faint with fear. She had never encountered such a danger as this. But her wonderfully trained organ did not fail her,

even in her extreme strait; though tiny drops of dew stood on her pale forehead, though her heart throbbed suffocatingly, her accent was still measured and full of subdued music.

‘Did he implicate any one?’

It was the very desperation of the sword player, who, finding his science baffled, comes to close quarters, with shortened blade. Alan did indulge vindictiveness so far, as to pause for a full minute before answering, regarding his companion all the while intently. But, though he could be pitiless towards his own sex at times, he never could bear to see a woman in pain, even if she had injured him mortally; that minute—a fearfully long one to ‘my lady’—exhausted his revenge.

‘He *would* have done so,’ he replied, ‘but I stopped him before a name could pass his lips. I am very glad I did. It don’t follow that I should have believed him. But it is better as it is. Don’t you think so, Aunt Mildred?’

The revulsion of feeling tried her almost more severely than the previous apprehension had done. At that moment ‘my lady’ was thoroughly and naturally grateful. Wyverne saw that she was simply incapable of a reply just then. He was considerate enough to give her breathing space, while he went into several details with which you are

already acquainted, and mentioned the conditions he had imposed upon Knowles, which the latter had subscribed to.

Lady Mildred listened and approved, mechanically. Her temperament had been for years so well regulated that unwonted emotion really exhausted her. Her bright dark eyes looked dull and heavy, and languor, for once, was not feigned.

‘There is another question,’ Alan went on; ‘it is rather an important one to me, and, I think, my chief reason for coming here to-day was to ask your opinion, and your help, if you choose to give it. What is to be done about Helen? You know, when a man has been in Norfolk Island for several years, and it comes out that some one else has committed the forgery, they always grant him a free pardon. That is the government plan; but it don’t suit me. Besides, Helen has forgiven me long ago, I believe, and we are perfectly good friends now. For that very reason I cannot throw the chance away of clearing myself in her eyes. There are limits to self-denial and self-sacrifice. Yet it is delicate ground to approach, especially for me. As far as I am concerned—‘let conjugal love continue;’ it would scarcely promote a mutual good understanding, if Helen were told of the part her lord and master played in the drama, and of the liberal odds that he

laid so early in their acquaintance. Yet it would be hard to keep his name out of the story altogether : mere personal dislike would never account for Knowles' elaborate frauds. Aunt Mildred, I tell you fairly, I am not equal to the diplomatic difficulty ; but I think *you* are. Shall I leave it in your hands entirely ? If you will only satisfy Helen that I have satisfied *you*—if you will make her believe implicitly that I have been blameless throughout in thought, and word, and deed, and that black treachery has been used against us both—on my honour and faith I will never enter on the subject, even if she wished to do so, unless Helen or I were dying. She shall send me one line only to say—‘I believe’—and then, we will bury the sorrow and the shame as soon as you will. I think none of us will care to move the gravestone.’

For a moment or two ‘my lady’ was hardly sure if she heard aright. She knew that it was impossible to over-estimate the danger to which Wyverne had alluded. Helen’s temper had grown more and more wilful and determined since her marriage ; it was hard to say, to what rash words or deeds resentment and remorse might lead her. She knew Alan, too, well ; but she scarcely believed him capable of such a sacrifice as this. And could he be serious in choosing *her* as his delegate ? She

gazed up in his face, half expecting to find a covert mockery there ; but its expression was grave, almost to sternness.

‘Do you really mean it?’ she faltered. ‘It is so good, so generous of you. And will you trust me thoroughly?’

‘Yes, Aunt Mildred, I will trust you—*again*.’

A thousand complaints and revilings would not have carried so keen a reproach as that which was breathed in those few sad, quiet words. Lady Mildred shrank as she felt them come home. Involuntarily she looked up once more ; it was a fatal error. She encountered the full light of the clear, keen eyes—resistless in the power of their single-hearted chivalrous truth. In another second her head had gone down on Wyverne’s shoulder, as he sat close to her couch, and she was sobbing out something incoherent about ‘forgiveness.’

Now, I do not suppose that the annals of intellectual duelling can chronicle a more complete defeat than this. It is with the greatest pain and reluctance that I record it. What avails it to be a model *diplomate*, to sit for half a lifetime at the feet of Machiavel, to attain impassibility and insensibility—equal to a Faquir’s as a rule—if womanhood, pure and simple, is to assert itself in such an absurdly sudden and incongruous way? It is pleasant

to reflect, that this human nature of ours is hardly more consistent in evil than in good. There are doubts if even the arch-cynicism of Talleyrand carried him through to the very last. I once before ventured to draw a comparison between him and 'my lady'—that was when I *did* believe in her.

Wyverne was intensely surprised, rather puzzled what to do or say, and decidedly gratified. Though he had suspected her from the first, he had never nourished any bitter animosity against Lady Mildred. He had a sort of idea that she was only acting up to her principles—such as they were—which were very much what popular opinion assigns to the ideal Jesuit. Quite naturally and easily, he began to soothe her now.

'Dear Aunt Mildred, I hardly know what I have to forgive' (this was profoundly true); 'but here, in my ignorance, I bestow plenary absolution. I fear I have worried you, when you were really not well. I won't tease you with a word more. Mind, I leave everything in your hands, with perfect confidence.'

Lady Mildred had fallen back on her sofa again, pressing her handkerchief against her eyes, though no tears were flowing.

'If I had only known you better—and sooner,' she murmured.

I dare say she meant every word sincerely when

she said it; nevertheless, as a historian, I incline to believe that no insight into Alan's character would have altered 'my lady's' line of policy at any previous moment. Perhaps some such idea crossed Wyverne's mind, for there certainly was a slight smile on his lip, as he rose to take an affectionate farewell. The few parting words are not worth recording.

Alan was more than discontented, whenever he thought over these things, calmly and dispassionately, in after days. Twice he had looked his enemies in the face, and on both occasions had doubtless borne off the honours of the day; but it was an unsubstantial victory at best, and a triumph scarcely more profitable, than that of the Imperial trifier, who mustered his legions to battle, and brought back as trophies shells from the seashore. The recollection was not poisonous enough to destroy the good elements of his character, but it darkened and embittered his nature, permanently.

The fact is, when a man has been thoroughly duped and deluded, and has suffered irreparably from the fraud, it is not easily forgotten, unless retaliation has been fully commensurate with the injury. I am not advocating a principle, but simply stating a general fact. With a great misfortune it is different. We say—'Let us fall into His hand,

not into the hand of man.' So, at least, is consolation more easily sought for, and found.

Remember Esau—as he was before he sold his birthright—as he is when, in fear and trembling, Jacob looks upon his face again. That score of years has changed the cheery, careless hunter of deer into the stern, resolute leader of robber-tribes—ruling his wild vassals with an iron sceptre—no longer 'seeking for his meat from God,' but grasping plunder, where he may find it, with the strong hand, by dint of bow and spear—truly, a fitting sire from whose loins twelve Dukes of Edom should spring—not wholly exempt from kind, generous impulses, as that meeting between Penuel and Succoth proves—but as little like his former self, as a devil is like an angel. If the eyes of the blind old patriarch, who loved his reckless first-born so well, had been opened as he lay a-dying, he could scarcely have told if 'this were his very son Esau, or no.'

CHAPTER XI.

SEMI-AMBUSTUS EVASIT.

ARE you curious to know how, all this while, it fared with the Great Earl and his beautiful bride? If the truth is to be told, I fear the answer must be unsatisfactory. No one, well acquainted with the contracting parties, believed that the marriage would be a *very* happy one; but they hoped it would turn out as well as the generality of conventional alliances. It was not so. Alan Wyverne was right enough in thinking that Clydesdale was most unfitted to the task of managing a haughty, wilful wife; but even he never supposed that dissension would arise so quickly, and rankle so constantly. There had been few overt or actual disputes, but a spirit of bitter antagonism was ever at work, which sooner or later was certain to have an evil ending.

It would be unfair to infer that the fault was all on the Earl's side. It was his manner and demeanour that told most against him: he had been

so accustomed to adulation from both sexes, that he could not understand why his wife should not accept his dictatorial and overbearing ways, as patiently as his other dependents: so even his kindnesses were spoilt by the way in which they were offered, or rather enforced. But—at all events, in the early days of their married life—he was really anxious that not a wish or whim of Helen's should remain ungratified, and spared neither trouble nor money to ensure this.

The fair Countess was certainly not free from blame. She had said to Maud Brabazon—‘I will try honestly to be a good wife, if he will let me.’ Now, her most partial friend could hardly assert, that she had fairly acted up to this good resolve. Perhaps it would have been too much to expect that she should entertain a high respect or a devoted affection for her consort; but she might have masked indifference more considerately, or, at least, have dissembled disdain. Her hasty, impetuous nature seemed utterly changed; she never by any chance lost her temper now, at any provocation, especially when such came from her husband. It would have been much better if she *had* done so, occasionally: nothing chafes a character like Clydesdale's so bitterly, as that imperial *nonchalance*, which seems to waver between contempt and pity. Besides, her

notions of conjugal obedience were rather peculiar. The Earl was, at first, perpetually interfering with her arrangements, by suggestions for or against, which sounded unpleasantly like orders; if these chanced to square with Helen's inclination, or if the question was simply indifferent to her, she acted upon them, without claiming any credit for so doing; if otherwise—she disregarded and disobeyed them with a serene determination, and seemed to think, 'having changed her mind since she saw him,' quite a sufficient apology to her exasperated Seigneur.

An incident very characteristic of this had, somehow, got abroad.

Lady Clydesdale was about to accompany her husband to a tremendous State-dinner, the host being one of the greatest personages in this realm, next to royalty—no other than the Duke of Camelot. When she came down, ready to start, one would have thought it impossible to have found a fault in her toilette. But the Earl chose to consider himself an authority on feminine attire, and chanced to be in a particularly captious humour that evening: the ground colour of Helen's dress—a dark Mazarine blue—did not please him at all, though really nothing could match better with her *parure* of sapphires and diamonds. She listened to his comments and strictures without contradicting them,

apparently not thinking the subject worth discussion : her silent indifference irritated Clydesdale excessively. At last he said—

‘Helen, I positively insist on your taking off that dress; there will be time enough if you go up immediately. Do you hear me?’

For an instant she seemed to hesitate; then she rose, with an odd smile on her proud lip—‘Yes, there will be time enough,’ she said, and so left the room.

But minutes succeeded minutes, till it was evident that the conventional ‘grace’ must even now be exceeded, and still no re-appearance of Helen. The Earl could control his feverish impatience no longer, and went up himself, to hurry her. He opened the door hastily, and fairly started back, in wrath and astonishment, at the sight he saw.

The Countess was attired, very much as Maud Brabazon found her, when she paid the midnight visit that you may remember. Perhaps her dressing-robe was a shade more gorgeous, but there was no mistaking its character. There she sat, buried in the depths of a luxurious *causeuse*, her little feet crossed on the fender (it was early spring and the nights were cold); all the massy coils of cunningly wrought plaits and tresses freed from artistic thralldom, a half-cut *novelette* in her hand,—altogether,

the prettiest picture of indolent comfort, but not exactly the 'form' of a great lady expected at a ducal banquet.

The furious blood flushed Clydesdale's face to dark crimson.

'What—what does this mean?' he stammered. His voice was not a pleasant one at any time, and rage did not mellow its tone. The superb eyes vouchsafed one careless side-glance, a gleam of scornful amusement lighting up their languor.

'The next time you give your orders,' she replied, 'you had better be more explicit: you commanded me to take off that blue dress, but you said nothing about putting on another. Perhaps my second choice might not have pleased you either. Besides, one is not called upon to dress twice, even for a State dinner. You can easily make a good excuse for me: if the Duke is very angry, I will make my peace with him myself. I'm sure he will not bear malice long.'

Now, putting predilection and prejudice aside, which do you think was most in the wrong? The Earl was unreasonable and tyrannical, first; but under the circumstances, I do think he 'did well to be angry.' He was *so* angry—that he was actually afraid to trust himself longer in the room, and hurried downstairs, growling out some of his choicest

anathemas (not *directed*, it must be owned) ; as has been hinted before, Clydesdale kept at least one Recording angel in full employment. The spectacle of marital wrath did not seem greatly to appal the wilful Countess. She heard the door of the outer chamber close violently, without starting at the crash, and settled herself comfortably to her book again, as if no interruption had occurred.

About this time the Earl began to be haunted by a certain dim suspicion : at first it seemed too monstrously absurd to be entertained seriously for a moment ; but soon it grew into form and substance, and became terribly distinct and life-like—the possibility of his wife's despising him. When he had once admitted the probability, the mischief was done : he brooded over the idea with a gloomy pertinacity, till a blind, dull animosity took the place of love and trust. He swore to himself that, at whatever cost, he would regain and keep the supremacy : unfortunately he had never had it yet ; and it would have been easier for him, to twist a bar of cold steel with his bare hands, than to mould the will of Countess Helen. Every day he lost instead of gaining ground, only embittering the spirit of resistance, and widening a breach which could never be repaired. As if all this were not enough, before the year was out, another and

darker element of discord rose up in the Earl's moody heart—though he scarcely confessed it even to himself—a fierce, irrational jealousy of Alan Wyverne.

No one who had chanced to witness the parting of the cousins in the library at Dene, would have allowed the possibility of a free unreserved intimacy, troubled, as it would seem, neither by repining nor misgiving, being established between them within two years. Though Alan spoke hopefully at the time, it may be doubted if he believed in his own words. Yet such contradictions and anomalies happen so often, that we ought to be tired of wondering. They moved in the same set, both in town and country, and were necessarily thrown much together. Wyverne soon managed to persuade himself that there was not the slightest reason why he should purposely avoid his fascinating cousin. As for Helen, I fear she did not discuss the question with her conscience at all. So, gradually and insensibly they fell into the old pleasant confidential ways—such as used to prevail before that fatal afternoon when Wyverne's self-control failed him, and he 'spake unadvisedly with his lips' under the oak bows of the Holme Wood.

Perhaps there might have been a certain amount of self-delusion; but I fancy that for a long time

there was not a thought of harm on either side. As far as Alan was concerned, I do believe that his affection for Helen was as pure and honest and single-hearted as it is possible for a sinful man to entertain.

Nevertheless, the change in the usual demeanour of the cousins, when they chanced to be together, was too marked to escape observation. Her best friends could not deny that marriage had altered Lady Clydesdale very much for the worse: her manner in general society was decidedly cold, and there was often weariness in her great eyes, when they were not disdainful or defiant. The first sound of Alan's voice seemed to act like a spell in bringing the Helen Vavasour of old days, with all the charming impulses and petulance of her maidenhood. Ever since his interview with Nina Lenox, Wyverne had been constantly moody and pre-occupied; but the dark cloud was always lifted before he had been five minutes in his cousin's presence; the frank, careless gaiety which once made him such a fascinating companion returned quite naturally, and he could join in the talk or enter into the project of the hour with as much interest as ever. It *was* remarkable, certainly—so much so that the Earl might perhaps have been justified in not altogether approving of the state of things, especially as he could not be

expected to appreciate Alan's feelings, simply because a chivalrous and unselfish affection was something quite beyond his mental grasp.

Notwithstanding all this, I repeat that his jealousy was irrational. He was sulky and uneasy in Wyverne's presence, and disliked seeing him with Helen, not because he actually mistrusted either, but because he hated the man from the bottom of his heart. He did not believe in the possibility of his haughty wife's ever straying, even in thought or word, from the path of duty ; but she was the chief of his possessions, and it exasperated him, that his enemy should derive profit or pleasure from her society. In despite of an inordinate self-esteem, Clydesdale could not shake off the disagreeable idea, that, wherever they had met, so far Alan had got the better of him. He fancied he could detect a calm contemptuous superiority in the latter's tone (it was purely imaginary), which irritated him to the last degree. Added to all this—and it was far the strongest motive of all—was the consciousness of having done Alan a deadly wrong, in intention, if not in fact. It was true that he knew nothing of Harding Knowles's treachery. He had carefully abstained from asking a question, either before or after the result ; but he knew that he had bought an unscrupulous agent, on a tacit understanding that

a full equivalent should be given for the money ; and he could guess how thoroughly the contract had been carried out. In one word, the Earl wished Wyverne dead, simply because he could not comfortably look him in the face. Rely on it, that poison-bag lies at the root of many fangs that bite most sharply.

Nevertheless, Lord Clydesdale abstained from confiding his antipathies even to his wife. Deficient as he was in tact, he felt that a battle would probably ensue, to which all other dissensions would have been child's play. He had no solid grounds to go upon, and he did not see his way clearly to a satisfactory result. So, in spite of his frowns and sulkiness, matters went on smoothly enough up to the time of the disclosures recorded in the last chapter.

It is probable that Lady Mildred discharged her embassy faithfully, albeit discreetly. The subject was never mentioned between them ; but Helen's manner towards her cousin perceptibly softened, though she felt a strange constraint occasionally that she could hardly have accounted for. The truth was—if she had indulged in self-examination, at this conjuncture she ought to have begun to mistrust herself. It was dangerous to brood over Alan's wrongs now, when it was too late to make him any substantial amends.

But the world would not long 'let well alone.' Before the season was far advanced, *cancans* were rife; and Lady Clydesdale's name was more than lightly spoken of: glances, when levelled at her, became curious and significant, instead of simply admiring. Of course, the parties most intimately interested are the last to hear of such things; but Wyverne did begin to suspect the truth, not so much from any hints or inuendoes, as from a certain reticence and reserve among his intimates at the clubs and elsewhere. One evening, Maud Brabazon took heart of grace, and told him all she had heard, after her own frank fashion.

Not even during the hours which followed the miserable parting in the library at Dene, had Alan felt so utterly hopeless and spirit-broken as he did that night, as he sate alone, thinking over the situation, and trying with every energy of his honest heart to determine what he ought to do. Men have grown grey and wrinkled under briefer and lighter pain. It did seem hard: when he was conscious of innocence of intention—when he had so lately, at such costly self-sacrifice, abstained from personally justifying himself in Helen's eyes, sooner than compromise her husband—when he had just found out that he had been juggled out of his life's hope through no fault or negligence of his own—he was

called upon to resign the shadow of happiness that was left him still, merely because the world chose to be scandalous, and not to give him credit for common honesty. But, after his thoughts had wandered for hours in darkness and in doubt, the light broke clear. Half-measures were worse than useless. To remain in England and to maintain a comparative estrangement—to meet Helen only at appointed times and seasons—to set a watch upon his lips whenever he chanced to be in her society—was utterly impracticable. Like other and braver and wiser men, he owned that he had no alternative—he was bound to fly. Weak and fallible as he was in many respects, Wyverne's character contained this one element of greatness—when he had once made up his mind, it was easier to move a mountain than to change his resolve.

He never went near Clydesdale House for three days, and in that space all his arrangements were made, irrevocably. Early in the year Alan had purchased a magnificent schooner; she was fitting out at Ryde, and nearly completed; he had purposed to make a summer cruise in the Mediterranean, it was only turning the *Odalisque* to a more practical purpose, now. Two of his friends had organized a hunting expedition on a large scale, first through the interior of Southern Africa, then on to the Hima-

layas and the best of the 'big game' districts of India. Of course they were delighted to have Wyverne as a comrade, especially when he placed his yacht at their service; the *Odalisque*, both in size and strength, was perfectly equal to any ocean voyage. Their absence from England was to last at least three years. Alan felt a certain relief when it was all settled; nevertheless his heart was cold and heavy as lead, as he walked towards Clydesdale House to break the tidings. He found Helen alone; indeed, the Earl was out of town for the whole of the day, and was not to return till late in the evening. She could not understand what had kept her cousin away for the three days—of course she had wanted him particularly for all sorts of things—and she was inclined to be mildly reproachful on the subject. Wyverne listened for awhile, though every word brought a fresh throb of pain, simply because he had not courage to begin to undeceive her.

At last he spoke, you may guess how gently and considerately, yet keeping nothing back, and not disguising the reasons for his departure. He had felt sure, all along, that Helen would be bitterly grieved at his determination, and would strive to oppose it; but he was not prepared for the passionate outbreak which ensued.

The Countess's cheek had changed backwards and

forwards, from rose-red to pale, a dozen times while her cousin was speaking, and on the beautiful brow there were signs, that a child might have read, of a coming storm ; but she did not interrupt him till he had quite said his say ; then she started to her feet ; a sudden movement—swift, and lithe, and graceful as a Bayadère's spring—brought her close to Alan's chair ; she was kneeling at his side, with her slender hands locked round his arm, gazing up into his face, before he could remonstrate by gesture or word.

‘ You shall not go. I don't care what they say—friends or enemies—you shall not go. Alan, I will do anything, and suffer anything, and go anywhere ; but I will not lose *you*. With all your courage, will you fail me when I am ready to brave them ? You cannot mean to be so cruel. Ah, say—say you will stay with me.’

Alas ! if her speech was rash, her eyes were rasher still ; never, in the days when to love was no sin, had they spoken half so plainly.

Wyverne's breath came thick and fast, for his heart contracted painfully, as if an iron hand had grasped it. It was all over with self-delusion now ; the flimsy web vanished before the fatal eloquence of that glance, as a gauze veil shrivels before a strong straight jet of flame.

Now—though this pen of mine has done scant

justice to Helen's marvellous fascinations—let any man, in the prime of life, endowed with average passions and not exceptional principle, place himself in Alan's position, and try to appreciate its peril. Truly, I think, it would be hard measure, if human nature were called upon twice in a lifetime, to surmount such a temptation, and survive it. Yet he only hesitated while that choking sensation lasted. He raised Helen from where she knelt, and replaced her on the seat she had left, with an exertion of strength; subdued and gentle, but perfectly irresistible; when he spoke, his voice sounded unnaturally stern and cold.

‘If I had doubted at all about my absence being right and necessary, I should not doubt now. Child—you are not fit to be trusted. How dare you speak, at your age and in your station, of setting society at defiance, and trampling on conventionalities? You have duties to perform, and a great name to guard; have you forgotten all this, Countess Helen?’

On the last words, there was certainly an inflexion of sarcasm. The bitter pain gnawing at his heart, made him for the moment selfish and cruel. Perhaps it was as well; the hardness of his tone roused her pride, so that she could answer with comparative calmness.

'God help me! I have forgotten nothing—my miserable marriage least of all. Alan, what is the use of keeping up the deception? We need not lie to each other, if we are to part so soon. I never pretended to love Lord Clydesdale; but I think I could have done my duty, if he would have let me. How can you guess what I have to endure? I may be in fault too; but it has come to this—it is not indifference or dislike, now, but literally loathing. Do you know how careful he is, not to wound my self-respect? Only yesterday, he left in my dressing-room, where I could not help seeing it, a letter—ah, such a letter—from some *lorette* whom he protects. It was a delicate way of showing that he was displeased with me. And I have a dreadful misgiving that I shall become afraid of him—physically afraid, some day—I am not that yet—and then it will be all over with me. I feel safe—I can't tell why—when you are near; and you are going to leave me alone, quite alone.'

Now, to prevent mistakes hereafter, let me say explicitly that I do not defend Lady Clydesdale's conduct throughout. I don't know that any woman is justified, on any provocation, in speaking of her husband in such a strain, to her own brother, much less to her cousin, supposing that a warmer sentiment than the ties of kindred is manifestly out of

the question. Still, if you like to be lenient, you might remember that a passionate, wilful character like Helen's requires strong and wise guidance while it is being formed ; certainly her moral training had not been looked after so carefully as her accomplishments ; the mother considered her duty done when she had selected a competent governess ; so perhaps, after all, the Countess had as much religion and principle, as could be expected in Lady Mildred Vavasour's daughter.

It was a proof of the danger of such confidences, that Wyverne's blood boiled furiously as he listened, and all his good resolves were swallowed up for the moment in a savage desire to take Clydesdale by the throat ; but with a mighty effort he recovered self-control, before Helen could follow up her advantage.

'I did guess something,' he said, 'though not half the truth. I ought to preach to you about 'submission,' I suppose, and all the rest ; but I don't know how to do it, and I'm not in the humour to find excuses for your husband just now. Yet I am more than ever certain that I can do no good by staying here. I should only make your burden heavier ; you will be safer when I am gone. Of all things, you must avoid giving a chance to the scandal-mongers. Child, only be patient and prudent,

and we shall see better days. Remember, I am not going to be absent for ever. Three years or so will soon pass. We shall all be older and steadier when I come back, and the world will have forgotten one of us long before that. Say you will try.'

Dissimulation is sometimes braver than sincerity. Perhaps Alan got large credit in heaven for the brave effort by which he forced himself to speak half hopefully, and to put on that sad shadow of a smile.

In a book of this length, one can only record the salient points of conversations and situations; your imagination must fill up the intervals, reader of mine, if you think it worth the trouble to exercise it. It is enough to say, that gentle steadfastness of purpose carried the day, as it generally does, against passionate recklessness, and Helen perforce became reasonable at last. Though the cousins talked long and earnestly after this, the rest of the interview would hardly keep your interest awake. Such farewells, if they are correctly set down, savour drearily of vain repetitions, and are apt to be strangely incoherent towards their close.

'If you are in any great trouble or difficulty, promise me that you will send for Gracie; she will help you, I know, fearlessly and faithfully, to the utmost of her power.'

That was almost the very last of Wyverne's injunctions and warnings. If at the moment of parting his lips met Helen's, instead of only touching her forehead, as he intended, I hope it was not imputed to him as a deadly sin ; the sharp suffering of those few hours might well plead in extenuation ; and, be sure, He who ' judges not after man's judgment,' weighs *everything* when He poises the scale.

I never felt inclined to make a ' hero ' of Alan till now. I begin to think that he almost deserves the dignity. You must recollect that he was not an ascetic, nor an eminent Christian, nor even a rigid moralist, but a man essentially ' of the world, worldly.' If the Tempter had selected as his instrument, any other woman of equal or inferior fascinations, I very much doubt if Wyverne's constancy and continence would have emerged scatheless from the ordeal. But here, it was a question of honour rather than of virtue. When his second intimacy with Helen began to be a confirmed fact, he had signed a sort of special compact with himself, and he felt that it would be as foul treachery to break it, as to make away with money left in his charge, or to forfeit his plighted word. I do not say that this made his conduct more admirable ; I simply define his motives.

Alan went down to the North the next day to

wind up his home business, and he never saw Lady Clydesdale alone before he sailed. But he went forth on his pilgrimage an unhappy, haunted man. Wherever he went those eyes of Helen's followed him, telling their fatal secret over and over again, driving him wild with alternate reproaches and seductions. He saw them while couching among the sand-banks of an African stream watching for the wallowing of the river-horse; at his post in the jungle ravine, when rattling stones and crashing bushes gave notice of the approach of tiger or elk or bear; oftenest of all, when, after a hard day's hunting, he lay amongst his comrades sound asleep, looking up at the brilliant southern stars. His one comfort was the thought, 'Thank God, I *could* ask Gracie to take care of her.'

Alan was expiating the miserable error of fancying that his love was dead, because he had chosen formally to sign its death-warrant. The experiment has been tried for cycles of ages—sometimes after a more practical fashion—and it has failed oftener than it has succeeded.

Think on that old true story of Herod and his favourite wife. Lo! after a hundred delays and reprieves the final edict has gone forth; the sharp axe-edge has fallen on the slender neck of the Lily of Edom; surely the tortured heart of the unhappy

jealous tyrant shall find peace at last. Is it so? Months and months have passed away; there is high revel in Hebron, for a great victory has just been won; the blood-red wine of Sidon flows lavishly, flushing the cheeks and lighting up the eyes of the 'men of war;' and the Great Tetrarch drinks deepest of all, the cup-bearer can scarcely fill fast enough, though his hand never stints nor stays. So far, all is well; the lights and the turmoil and the crowd may keep even spectres aloof; but feasts, like other mortal things, must end, and Herod staggers off to his chamber alone. Another hour or so, and there rings through hall and corridor an awful cry, making the rude Idumean guards start and shiver at their posts—fierce and savage in its despair, but tremulous with unutterable agony, like the howl of some terrible wild beast writhing in the death-pang—

‘Mariamne! Mariamne!’

Does that sound like peace? The dead beauty asserts her empire once again; she has her murderer at her mercy now, more pitiably enslaved than ever.

Ah, woe is me! We may slay the body, if we have the power, but we may never baffle the Ghost.

CHAPTER XII.

VER UBI LONGUM, TEPIDASQUE PRÆBET
JUPITER BRUMAS.

AT first it really did appear as if, in expatriating himself for a season, Wyverne had acted wisely and well.

The purveyors of scandal, wholesale and retail, were utterly routed and disconcerted. The romance was a promising one, but it had not had time to develop itself into form and substance. As things stood, it was impossible to find any fresh supposition on Alan's prolonged absence, especially as no one ventured to hint at any quarrel or misunderstanding to account for his abrupt departure. Some were too angry to conceal their discomfiture. One veteran gossip, in particular, went about, saying in an injured, querulous way, that 'he wondered what Wyverne would do next. He shouldn't be surprised to hear of his making a pilgrimage to Mecca, having turned Turk for a change.' It was a great sport to hear Bertie Grenvil, at the club, 'drawing'

the old *cancanier*, condoling with him gravely, and encouraging him with hopes 'of having something *really* to talk about before the season was over.' Indeed it seemed by no means improbable that the Cherub, in person, would furnish the materials; for, having convinced himself by repeated experiments that Maude Brabazon either had no heart at all, or that it was absolutely impregnable, he had taken out lately a sort of roving commission, and was cruising about all sorts of waters, with the red signal of 'no quarter' hoisted permanently.

Lord Clydesdale rejoiced intensely, after his saturnine fashion, at Wyverne's departure. It put him into such good humour that for days he forgot to be captious, or overbearing, and actually made some clumsy overtures towards a reconciliation with his wife. It must be confessed, he met with scant encouragement in that quarter. Helen was in no mood to 'forgive and forget' just then. There are women whom you may tyrannize over one week, and cajole the next, amiable enough to accept both positions with equanimity; but the haughty Countess was not of these Griseldas. Her temper was embittered rather than softened by her great sorrow and loneliness; for the void that Alan had left behind him was wider and darker than ever she had reckoned on. Of course she tried the old counter-

irritation plan (nine out of ten do), seeking for excitement wherever it could be found. The result was not particularly satisfactory, but the habits of dissipation and recklessness strengthened their hold hourly. She had a legion of caprices, and indulged them all, without pausing to consider the question of right or wrong, much less of consequences. Before the season closed, Helen was virtually enrolled in the fastest of the thorough-bred sets, and might have disputed her evil pre-eminence with the most famous *lionne* of the day.

Naturally the scandal-mongers began to open—first their eyes, and then their mouths again. Every morning brought some fresh story, generally founded at least on fact, with Lady Clydesdale for its heroine. They made wild work with her name before long, but so far no one could attach to it the shame of any one definite *liaison*. A circle of courtiers followed her wherever she went, but not one of these—jealously as they watched for the faintest indication of a decided preference—could have told who stood first in the favour of their wilful, capricious sovereign. Sometimes one would flatter himself, for a moment, that he really had gained ground, and made an abiding impression; but, before he could realize his happiness, the weary, absent look would return to the beautiful eyes, and the unhappy adorer

had only to fall back to the dead level of his fellows, in wrath and discomfiture.

No one the least interested in Helen could see how things were going, without serious alarm. Lady Mildred, Max Vavasour, and Maud Brabazon, each in their turn, attempted remonstrance. The Countess met her mother's warning apathetically, her brother's contemptuously, her friend's affectionately—with perfect impartiality disregarding them all.

It was more than doubtful if Clydesdale could have done any good by interfering. He certainly did not try the experiment. From first to last he never stretched out a finger to arrest his fair wife on her road to Avernus. He allowed her to go where she would—very often alone—only, indeed, escorting her when it suited his own plans or purposes. Whether he was base enough to be actually careless about her temptations, or whether he resolutely shut his eyes to the possibility of her coming to harm, it would be hard to say. Nevertheless, from time to time, Helen had to endure furious outbreaks of his temper; and with each of these, that strange thrill of physical fear grew stronger and stronger. But jealousy had nothing whatever to do with rousing the storms, which usually burst forth on some absurdly frivolous provocation. The fact was, when the Earl was sulky or wroth, he chose to

vent his brutal humour on the victim nearest to his hand that was likely to feel the blows most acutely. He saw that such scenes *hurt* his wife in some way, though he did not guess at her real feelings ; and it pleased him to think that there was a vulnerable point in her armour of pride and indifference. He would have rejoiced yet more if he had detected the effort which it cost her sometimes—not to tremble while she vanquished his savage eyes with the cold disdain of her own.

The domestic picture is not pleasant enough to tempt us to linger over it. Perhaps, after all, it would have been better—it could scarcely have been worse—if Alan had stayed on, and braved it out ; but this is only arguing from consequences.

For a long time there were no certain tidings of the hunting-party : a vague report got abroad of an encounter with lions in which some Englishman had been terribly hurt, but it was not even known whether it was Wyverne or one of his companions. So months became years, and Alan's place in the world was nearly filled up ; a few of his old friends, from time to time, ' wondered how he was getting on,'—that was all. Yet he was not entirely forgotten. Every morning and evening, in her simple orisons, Grace Beauclerc joined his name to those of her husband and her children ; and another woman

—you know her well—seldom dared to pray, because she felt it would be a mockery to kneel with a guilty longing and repining at her heart.

It was the fourth winter after Wyverne's departure; the last intelligence of the party dated from some months back; it reported them all alive and well, in the northern provinces of India; there were wonderful accounts of their sport, but no word as to any intention of returning.

The Clydesdales were at Naples. Helen's health, which had begun to fail rapidly of late, was pretext enough for a change of climate; but it is more than doubtful if her husband would have taken this into consideration, if other inducements had not drawn him southwards.

The Earl's home was certainly not a happy one; but even modern society does not admit domestic discomfort as an excuse for outraging the common proprieties of life; the most profligate of his companions agreed, that he might at least have taken the trouble to mask his infidelities more carefully; they could not understand such utter disregard of the trite monachal maxim — *Si non casté, cauté tamen*. Personally, one would have thought, Lord Clydesdale was not attractive; but a great Seigneur rarely has far to go when he seeks 'consolations:' there are always victims ready to be sacrificed, no

matter how repulsive the Idol may be ; for interest and vanity, and a dozen other *irritamenta malorum* work still as potently as ever. It so chanced that the siren of the hour had selected South Italy for her winter quarters, so that the Earl's sudden consideration for his wife was easily accounted for.


Naples was crowded that year ; every country in Europe was nobly represented there ; so that it really was no mean triumph when the popular voice, without an audible dissentient, assigned the royalty of beauty to Lady Clydesdale. Rash and wilful in every other respect, it was not likely that Helen would be prudent about her own health ; indeed, if she would only have taken common precautions, her state was not precarious enough to forbid her mixing in society as usual.

If you could only have ignored certain dangerous symptoms, you would have said she was lovelier than when you saw her last : her superb eyes seemed larger than ever ; softer, too, in their languor, more intense in their brilliancy ; the rose-tint on her cheek was fainter, perhaps, but more exquisitely delicate and transparent now ; and her figure had not lost, so far, one rounded outline of its magnificent mould.

She had a perfectly fabulous success : before she had been in Naples a fortnight they raved about her,

not only in her own circle, but in all others beside. It was literally a popular *furor*: the laziest *lazzarone* would start from his afternoon sleep to gaze after her with a muttered oath of admiration, when 'la bellissima Contessa' drove by. She had adorers of all sorts of nations, and was worshipped in more languages than she could speak or understand.

At last, one man singled himself out from the crowd—like the favourite 'going through his horses'—and, for awhile, seemed to carry on the running alone. That was the Duca di Gravina. Perhaps Europe could not have produced a more formidable enemy, when a woman's honour was to be assailed. The Duke was not thirty yet, and he had won long ago an evil renown, and deserved it thoroughly. Few could look at his face without being attracted by its delicate classical beauty; the dark earnest eyes, trained to counterfeit any emotion—never to betray one—strengthened the spell, and an indescribable fascination of manner generally completed it. There was not a vestige of heart or conscience to interfere with his combinations; to say that he had no principle does not express the truth at all: the Boar of Capreæ himself was not more coolly cynical and cruel. Nevertheless, these last pleasant attributes lay far below the surface; and a very fair seductive surface it was.



The Duke was more thoroughly in earnest now than he had ever been in his life; and people seemed to think there could be but one result—the most natural and reasonable one, according to the facile code of Southern morality. Lord Clydesdale persisted in ignoring the whole affair; and no one cared to take the trouble of enlightening him against his will. It looked as if he had exhausted his jealousy and suspicions on Alan Wyverne, and had none to waste on the rest of the world. One could not help thinking of the old fable, of the stag who always fed with his blind eye towards the sea, suspecting danger only from the land-quarter. It was an ingenious plan enough; but the sea is wide and hunters are wily: they came in a boat, you remember, and shot the poor horned Monops to death with many arrows.

Di Gravina was almost as daring and successful at play as in intrigue; in both he was well served by a half-intuitive sagacity which suggested the right moment for risking a grand *coup*. He began to think that such a crisis was now near at hand. One afternoon Lady Clydesdale and several more of her set went up to Capo di Monte to lounge about in the gardens and drink the fresh sea-breeze. The party broke up into detachments very soon, and the Duke found it easy to bring about a comfortably

confidential *tête-à-tête*. Helen was in a dangerous frame of mind that day. She had gone through a stormy scene with her husband in the morning, whose temper had broken out as usual without rhyme or reason. The velvet softness of the Italian's tone and manner contrasted strangely with the Earl's harsh voice and violent gestures. At first it simply *rested* her to sit still and listen; but gradually the fascination possessed her till her pulse began to quicken, though her outward languor remained undisturbed. Not a particle of passion, much less of love, so far, was at work in her heart; but in the desperation of weariness she felt tempted to try a more practical experiment in the way of excitement than she had ever yet ventured on. Di Gravina saw his advantage and pressed it mercilessly. For some minutes the Countess had ceased to answer him; she sat, with eyes half closed, just the dawning of a dreamy smile on her beautiful lips, like one who yields not unwillingly to the subjugation of a mesmerizer's riveted glance and waving hands.

At last she looked up suddenly, evidently with her purpose set. How her lips or her eyes would have answered can never be known, for at that instant she became aware of the presence of a third person, who had approached unheard while they were talking so earnestly.

The new comer leant against the trunk of a palm-tree, contemplating the pair with a quaint expression of mingled curiosity and sadness. His face was sun-burnt to a black bronze, and almost buried in a huge bushy beard; but the disguise was not complete. Helen sprang to her feet impulsively as of old, with a low, happy cry, and in another second she had clasped her hands round Alan Wyverne's arm, with just breath enough left to gasp out a few fond incoherent syllables of welcome.

The Italian did not quite comprehend the situation at first; but he saw instantly that he had lost the game. A smothered blasphemy worthy of the coarsest *facchino* (and they swear hard in those parts, remember) escaped from his delicate, chiselled lips. For a moment his scowling eyes belied their training, and all the soft beauty vanished from his face, malign as a baffled devil's. Nevertheless, he was his own silky self again, before Helen recovered from her emotion sufficiently to make her excuses, and to present 'her cousin.' To do the Duke justice, he behaved admirably.

'It is a most happy meeting,' he said. 'Will the Countess permit the *stranger* to offer his felicitations and—to retire? She must have so much to say to the cousin who has so suddenly returned.'

There was not an inflection of sarcasm in his voice; but he turned once as he went, and his glance crossed Wyverne's. These two understood each other thoroughly.

The pen of the readiest writer would fail in recording the long incoherent conversation which ensued. Helen had so much to ask and so much to tell that she never could get through a connected sentence or allow Alan to finish one. She was so simply and naturally happy that he had not the heart to check or reprove her. Even Stoicism has its limits and intervals of weakness, and Alan was a poor philosopher with all his good intentions 'given in.'


Certain members of her party came to reclaim Lady Clydesdale, before half their say was said. (Would they have intervened so soon, if the Duca di Gravina had remained master of the position?) So Alan had to content himself with accompanying his cousin to her own door. On the whole, he thought it better not to risk meeting the Earl that night; he did not feel quite cool and collected enough for the encounter.

Let me remark casually that there was nothing extraordinary in the opportune apparition. The *Odalisque* had anchored in the bay late on the previous night. Wyverne met an old acquaintance

immediately on landing, who told him at once that the Clydesdales were in Naples. He could not resist the temptation of calling, and the servants directed him naturally to the place where he was sure to find Helen. Nevertheless I own that the situation savours of the *coup de théâtre*. I don't see why one should not indulge in a slight touch of melodrama now and then; but there are men alive who can testify that such an intervention, coming exactly at the critical moment, is an actually accomplished fact.

No words can do justice to Lord Clydesdale's intense exasperation, when he heard that his enemy had returned, sound in life and limb. He could not for very shame forbid his wife to receive him just yet, but his whole nature was transformed; the careless, negligent husband became suddenly a suspicious, tyrannical jailor. Besides this, another foe lay in wait for Wyverne. The Duca di Gravina made no secret of his discomfiture or of his lust for revenge. This last enmity came round to Helen's ears, and she confessed her apprehension frankly to her cousin. He only laughed carelessly and confidently.

'I've seen a good deal of the feline tribe in these three years,' he said, 'and I begin to understand them. That leopard is too handsome to be very



vicious. Nevertheless, I think it's as well you've given up *domesticating* him.'

There was no bravado in his tone; he had only one honest purpose—to reassure Helen. The event proved the correctness of his judgment. The Duke had been 'out' more than once; but it was only when he was compelled to pay with his body for some one of his iniquities. He loved life and its luxuries too well to risk the first without absolute necessity. Exaggerated reports of Wyverne's prowess in the Far East had got abroad; and the crafty voluptuary thoroughly appreciated valour's better part, when a formidable foe was to be confronted.

But the ground under their feet was nothing else than a Solfaterra, and the volcanic elements could not remain quiet long. Early one morning, Wyverne got a hurried message from his cousin, asking him to meet her immediately in the garden of the Villa Reale. As he approached the spot where she was sitting, he was struck painfully by the listless exhaustion of her attitude. When she looked up, as he came to her side, a cold thrill of terror shot through Alan's frame. He saw the truth at last—a truth that Helen had striven so carefully to conceal, that it was no wonder her cousin had failed to realize it. Her cheeks were perfectly colourless, and seemed to have grown all at once strangely thin

and hollow ; the dark circles under her eyes made them unnaturally bright and large, and a wild haggard look possessed and transformed her face. The signs were terribly plain to read—not of death immediately imminent, but of slow, sure decay.

Alan's courage and self-control were well-nigh exhausted before he had listened to half of what she had to tell. It appeared that on the previous evening there had been an outbreak of Lord Clydesdale's temper, incomparably more violent than any which had yet occurred. For the first time he had brought Wyverne's name into the quarrel—upbraiding, and accusing, and threatening his wife by turns, till he worked himself to a pitch of brutal frenzy that did not quite confine itself to words. He swore that the intimacy should be broken off at any cost, and signified his determination to start with Helen for England within forty-eight hours. This was the last thing she remembered ; for just then she fainted. When she recovered she was alone with her maid, and had not seen her husband since.

' Ah, Alan ; will you not save me ?' she pleaded, piteously. ' There is no one else to help me—no one. And I *am* afraid now—really afraid : I have good reason. Do you see *this* ?'

She drew back her loose sleeve : on the soft white

flesh there was the livid print of a brutal grasp—marks such as were left on poor Mary of Scotland's arm by Lindsay's iron glove.

A groan of horror and wrath burst from Wyverne's white lips, and he shook from head to foot like a reed. A few minutes of such intense suffering might atone for more than one venal sin. He knew well enough what Helen meant, as her eyes looked over the bay, and rested with a feverish longing eagerness on the spot where the *Odalisque* lay at anchor, the tall taper masts cutting the sky-line. He knew that he had only to speak the word, and that she would follow to the world's end. He knew that her health was failing under tyranny and ill-treatment; while gentle nursing—such as he could tend her with—might still arrest the Destroyer. He knew how much excuse even society would find in this special case for the criminals. No wonder that he hesitated, muttering under his breath—

‘God help me! It is trying me *too* hard.’

There was silence only for a few seconds. During that brief space Alan's brain was whirling, but the images on his mind were clear. He remembered how he swore to himself to guard Helen from harm or temptation, faithfully and unselfishly; he thought of the End—possibly very near—and of the dishonour that would cling to his darling even in her

grave; last of all rose Hubert Vavasour's face, when he should hear that the man whom he loved as his own son had brought his daughter to shame. That turned the scale, and it never wavered afterwards. When Wyverne spoke his voice was firm, though intensely sad.

‘It is too late to wish that the fever or the lion had not spared me. If I had guessed what my return would cost, I would have stayed away till we both grew old. I did hope that we had grown steadier and wiser, and that people would have left us alone, and allowed us to be quietly happy. But I did not go through the pain of parting three years ago, to come back and ruin all. I stood firm then, and so I will—to the last. You will never call me cold or cruel; I feel that. You know how I suffer now while I am speaking; yet I say once more, we are better apart. Dear child, I am powerless to help you, unless it were in a way that I dare not think of. But you shall not be left to Clydesdale's tender mercies defenceless. I'll speak to Randolph to-day. He starts for England immediately, and he shall not lose sight of you till you reach it. He knows enough of your husband not to be surprised at being asked to watch over you. You may trust him as thoroughly as you could trust me. His heart is as soft as a woman's, and his nerves are

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steel: I've seen them tried, often and hardly. Write to Dene, and go there straight from Dover. Clydesdale will have come to his senses before that, and will scarcely object. Remember, I shall follow by the next steamer, and not sleep on the road; so that I shall be in England almost before you. Then we will see what is best to be done. I swear that you shall have rest and peace at any cost. This worry is killing you. Darling, do bear up bravely, just for a little while; and be prudent, and take care of yourself. It breaks my heart to see you looking so wan and worn.'

His voice shook, and his lip quivered, and his eyes were very dim.

Helen's head had sunk lower and lower while her cousin was speaking; she felt no anger, only utter weariness and despair; she had listened with a mechanical attention, hardly realizing the meaning of all the words, and she answered helplessly and vaguely,—

'Thank you, dear Alan, I dare say you are right. I am sure you mean to be kind; and I know you suffer when I suffer. It is foolish to be frightened when there is no real danger; but I am not strong now, so there is some excuse. Lord Clydesdale is probably ashamed of himself by this time, and I shall have nothing to fear for some days—not even

annoyance. Still, if it suits Colonel Randolph to go so soon, I shall be glad to feel there is one friend near me. You are sure you are coming straight to England? And you *will* come to Dene? Even if I am not there, I hope you will. I must not stay longer than to say good-bye; perhaps I have been watched and followed already. I don't know why I ventured here, or sent for you: I knew it could do no good; but I felt so weak and unhappy. Now—say good-bye, kindly, Alan?’

Though Wyverne knew it was wrong and unwise to detain her, a vague presentiment that it might be long before they met again, made him linger before uttering the farewell. While he paused a heavy foot crunched on the gravel behind them, and a hoarse, thick voice, close by, muttered something like a curse. The Earl stood there gazing at the cousins, his face flushed with passion, and a savage glare in his pale blue eyes. He essayed to speak with calmness and dignity; but the effort was absurdly apparent and vain.

‘Lady Clydesdale, I am excessively surprised and displeased at finding you here, especially after what passed last night. I request that you will return home instantly. You have more than enough to do in making your preparations, and there are some necessary visits that you must pay. We start by

to-morrow's steamer. I will follow you in a few minutes.'

The assumption of marital authority was a miserable failure. Neither of the supposed delinquents seemed at all awed or discomforted by the Earl's sudden apparition, or by his set speech. Helen rose to depart, silently, without vouchsafing a glance to her exasperated lord; Alan accompanied her a few steps, to whisper a few words of farewell, and to exchange a long pressure of hands; then he came back, and waited quietly to be spoken to.

Clydesdale's manner was arrogant and domineering to a degree; but he was evidently ill at ease; he kept lashing the gravel, angrily and nervously, with his cane, and his eyes wandered everywhere except where they were likely to encounter Wyverne's.

'I don't mean to have any discussion,' he said; 'and I choose to give no reasons. You will understand that I decidedly disapprove of your intimacy with Lady Clydesdale; I shall not allow her to meet you, on any pretence, at any future period; and I beg that you will not attempt to visit her. I mean to be master of my own house, and of my own wife. You will take this warning, or—you will take the consequences!'

For once in his life—he reproached himself

bitterly, afterwards, for the weakness—Alan fairly lost his temper. When he replied, his tone was, if anything, more galling than the other's, because its insolence was more subtle and refined.

‘ You might have spared threats,’ he said ; ‘ they would scarcely have answered, even if I had known you less thoroughly than I happen to do. You may frighten women—especially if they are weak and ill—but men, as a rule, don’t faint. Consequences ! What do you mean ? I fancy I have gauged your valour tolerably well ; it is superb up to a certain point—when personal risk comes in. If you had stayed on here, perhaps you *would* have hired a knife. You might have laid some ruffian five thousand piastres to fifty, for instance, that I should not be found dead within a week—those are your favourite odds, I believe—that’s about the extent of what one has to fear from your vengeance. I am not prepared to say how far a husband’s dictation ought to extend, who does not take the trouble to conceal his intrigues abroad, and treats his wife brutally at home ; and I’m not going to argue the point either. You certainly have a right to close your doors against me, or any one else. I shall not attempt to see my cousin while she remains in your house, or under your authority ; her father had better decide how long that ought to last. I

am no more inclined for discussion than you are; neither do I threaten. I simply give you fair warning. You had better put some constraint on your temper when your wife has to bear it; she has friends enough left to call you to an account, and make you pay it too. Max Vavasour will do his duty, I believe. If he don't—by G—d—I'll do mine !'

He turned on his heel with the last word, and walked away very slowly; but he was out of ear-shot before the Earl could collect himself enough to speak intelligibly. If he had received a blow between the eyes, delivered straight from the shoulder by a practised arm, he would hardly have been more staggered. He had been so accustomed, from childhood, to deference and adulation, that a direct, unmistakeable personal insult literally confounded him; for a brief space he felt thoroughly uncomfortable and humiliated; even his favourite curses came with an effort, and failed to act as anodynes. But he remembered every word that had passed, and acted accordingly.

From that day forth, Clydesdale hated both his wife and Wyverne more bitterly than ever; but he entirely changed his tactics for the present. The idea of a public *esclandre* and separation did not suit him at all. His manner towards Helen on their

journey homewards, was kinder and more considerate than it had ever been; he even condescended to express penitence for his late violence, and went so far as to promise amendment. He encouraged her wish to go straight to Dene, and only stipulating that he should accompany her there. The Countess was neither satisfied nor convinced; but she was weary, and wanted rest, and so acquiesced listlessly and passively.

On the very first opportunity after his arrival at Dene, the Earl sought an interview with Lady Mildred. It was easy to make his case good; he lied, of course, liberally; he confessed his failings, with certain reserves, and professed great contrition; he only insisted on one point—the necessity of keeping Wyverne at a distance, at least for a time. ‘My lady’ was equally anxious to avoid any public scandal, and she was not disposed to look too closely into the facts. Helen did not choose to make a confidante of her mother, so there was little fear of her contradicting anything. When Alan reached England and wrote to his uncle, he found the ground mined under his feet. The Squire believed in his nephew thoroughly, but he was not strong-minded enough to take any decidedly offensive step, and under the circumstances, inclined to temporize. He talked about ‘faults on both sides,’ spoke of a recon-

ciliation being certainly effected, and ended, by begging Alan not in anywise to interfere with it.

Wyverne felt sick and hopeless; he knew how much to believe of all this; but he had only one course open to him now—to avoid meeting the Clydesdales as carefully as possible. He hardly showed at all in town that spring, and encountered Helen very seldom, then only for a few minutes, when there was no opportunity for a confidence, even if either had had the heart to attempt such a thing. He spent all the summer and early autumn in Scotland.

Let me say now—for *your* comfort—my patient reader, that the End is very near.

CHAPTER XIII.

IMPLORE PACE.

THAT same year was drawing to its close, in a damp dreary December—one of those ‘green Yules’ which greedy sextons are supposed to pray for, and which all the rest of the world utterly abhor. Alan Wyverne was at the Abbey, with Crichton for his only companion, who had come over from Castle Dacre to join a large shooting-party which was to assemble on the morrow. He had travelled far that day; and he sat more than half-asleep, before the huge wood-fire, waiting for dinner and for Hugh, who had not finished dressing yet. He was dozing so soundly, that he never heard the great entrance-bell clang; but he rose to his feet with a start, as Algy Beauclerc came in. From that moment, Wyverne never heard a door open suddenly, without shuddering.

There was no mistaking the bearer of evil tidings: he had evidently ridden far and fast; he was drenched and travel-stained from heel to head; his bushy

beard was sodden and matted with the driving rain ; and his bluff, honest face looked haggard and weary.

Alan spoke first.

‘ Where do you come from ? Some one is dying or dead, I know. Who is it ?’

The other answered, as if it cost him an effort to speak, clearing his throat huskily :

‘ I have ridden here from Clydesholme. You must come back with me directly : Helen is dying. I don’t know if I have done right in fetching you, but I had no heart to refuse her ; and Gracie said I might come. We must have fresh horses, and strong ones, and some one who knows the country : I can never find my way back through such a night as this ; the waters were high in two places when I came through, and they are rising every hour. Don’t lose a minute in getting ready.’

Wyverne turned and walked to the bell without a word ; he staggered more than once before he reached it : then he sate down, burying his head in his hands, and never lifted it till the servant entered. His face, when he uncovered it, was ghastly pale, and he was shivering ; but he gave his orders quite distinctly and calmly.

‘ Don’t talk now, Algy,’ he said ; ‘ you shall tell me all when we are on our way. I shall be ready

before the horses are. Eat and drink meanwhile, if you can : you must need it now, and you will need it more before morning.'

In less than a quarter of an hour Wyverne returned, fully accoutred for the journey ; while he was dressing he had made arrangements with Hugh Crichton about telegraphing to put off the shooting party : his faculties seemed clear as ever ; he literally forgot nothing. But Beauclerc was not deceived by the unnatural composure.

'For God's sake, take something to keep your strength up,' he said. 'It's a long five and twenty miles, and the road and the weather are fearful. You'll never stand it if you start fasting.'


Alan looked at him vacantly, with a miserable attempt at a smile.

'I don't think I could eat anything just now,' he answered ; 'and water suits me best to-night.'

He filled a huge goblet and drained it thirstily ; the horses were announced at that moment. Beauclerc remembered afterwards how carefully his companion looked at girth and bit before they mounted : all his thoughts and energies were concentrated on one point — how to reach Clydesholme as soon as possible — he would not risk the chance of an accident that might delay them for a moment. Two grooms followed them, to ensure a spare horse

in case of a break-down ; and so they rode out into the wild weather on their dismal errand. It was a terrible journey, and not without danger ; the road was so steep and stony in places, that few men even in broad daylight would have cared to ride over it at that furious pace ; and twice the horses were off their feet in black rushing water. Strong and tough as he was, Beauclerc was almost too exhausted to keep his saddle before they reached Clydesholme. Nevertheless, he found breath and time to give his companion all the details it was requisite he should know.

It appeared that the Earl had brought his wife to Clydesholme, about a fortnight back, on the pretext of making preparations for a large party, which was to assemble there immediately after Christmas. During the whole of their stay they had been perfectly alone. Her health had been breaking faster every day ; while, from some inexplicable cause, his temper had grown more consistently tyrannical and savage in proportion to Helen's increasing weakness and physical inability to make even a show of resistance. On the previous evening there had occurred a terrible scene of brutal violence. Early the next morning the Earl had ridden forth, no one knew whither, evidently still in furious wrath. Shortly afterwards the Countess had been



seized with a coughing-fit, which had ended in the breaking of a large blood-vessel. As soon as she recovered strength enough to whisper an order, she had sent off an express for Grace Beaucherc, who chanced to be staying within a few miles. She and her husband came instantly; but it was only to find Helen's state hopeless. You know the rest.

Alan listened to all this, but answered never a word; indeed, he scarcely spoke, except to ask some question about the road, or to give some order about increasing or moderating their speed. Once Algy heard him mutter aloud,—‘If we are only in time!’—and when they had to halt for some minutes, while a sleepy lodge-keeper was opening the park-gates of Clydesholme, his ear caught the fierce grinding of Wyverne's teeth.

The broad front of the mansion was as dark as the night outside, for the windows of the Countess's apartments looked over the gardens, but several servants came quickly to answer the summons of the bell. There was a scared, puzzled look about them all. Beaucherc whispered to one of them, and then turned to Alan with a gleam of satisfaction on his face.

‘We *are* in time,’ he said; ‘thank God for that, at least. Stay here one minute, till I have seen Gracie.’

Wyverne waited in the huge gloomy hall, with scarcely more consciousness or volition left than a sleep-walker owns. He allowed a servant to remove his drenched overcoat, and thanked the man, mechanically; but he never knew how or when he had taken it off.

Beauclerc soon returned and led the way through several passages into a long corridor; at the further end of this, light gleamed through a half-open door. Algy did not attempt to enter, but motioned Alan silently to go in.

It was a large, dim room, magnificently furnished after an antique fashion, and Grace Beauclerc was sitting there alone. She looked wan and worn with grief, and she trembled all over as she locked her arms round Alan's neck, holding him for a second or two closely embraced, and whispering a warning in his ear.

'You must be very quiet and cautious. She has hardly strength enough left to speak. Call me if you see any great change. I shall be here. The doctors and nurses are close by; but she would not allow any one to remain when she guessed you had come. She caught the sound of hoofs before any of us heard it.'

She pointed to where a heavy curtain concealed an open doorway opposite. The gesture was not

needed. Wyverne knew very well that in the next chamber Helen lay dying. His brain was clear enough now, and he was self-possessed, as men are wont to be when they have done with hope, and have nothing worse to fear than what the next moment will bring. He walked forward without pausing, and lifted the curtain gently, but with a steady hand.

The entrance nearly fronted the huge old-fashioned couch, shadowed by a canopy and hangings of dark-green velvet, on which the Countess lay. Her cheeks had scarcely more colour than the snowy linen and lace of the pillows which supported her, and, till just now, it seemed as though her heavy eyelids would never be lifted again. But, at the sound of Alan's footfall, the eyes opened, large and bright, and the face lost the impress of Death, as it lighted and flushed, momentarily, with the keen joy of recognition and welcome.

He was kneeling, with his head bowed down on Helen's hand, that he held fast, when the first words were spoken.

'I felt sure you would come,' she murmured. 'I have been so still, and patient, and obedient—only that I might live long enough for *this*. I heard you, when you rode up, through all the wind and the rain. I am so glad—so glad. I can die

easily now. I could never have rested in my grave if we had not said—' Good-bye.' '

Wyverne tried twice to speak steadily, but there came only a miserable, broken moan.

' Ah! forgive—forgive! God knows, I thought I was right in keeping away. I did it for the best.'

The thin, transparent fingers of the hand that was free wandered over his brow, and twined themselves in his drenched hair, with a fond, delicate caress.

' I know you did, Alan. I was wrong—I, who would have risked all the sin and the shame. But I have suffered so much, that I do hope I shall not be punished any more. See—I can thank you now for standing firm, and holding *me* up too. And, dear, I know how good and faithful you have been from the very beginning. I know about those letters, and all the truth. I am content—more than content. I have had all your love—is it not so? You will look at my picture sometimes, and though she was wilful and wicked, no woman, however good or beautiful, will win you away from your own dead Helen. Ah! it hurts me to hear you sob. I feel your tears on my wrist, and they burn—they burn.'

Let us draw the curtain close. Even where

sympathy is sure, it is not lightly to be paraded—‘the agony of man unmanned.’ It was not long before Wyverne recovered self-control. They spoke no more aloud; but there were many of those low, broken whispers, half of whose meaning must be guessed when they are uttered, but which are remembered longer than the most elaborate sentences that mortal tongue ever declaimed.

For some minutes Helen’s eyes had been closed. Suddenly, though not a feature was distorted, Alan saw a terrible change sweep over her face, and rose to call in assistance. It seemed as if she divined his purpose, and wished to prevent it. The weak clasp tightened, for an instant, round his fingers, the weary eyelids lifted, enough to give passage to one last, loving look, and the slow syllables were just barely audible—

‘This once—only once more.’

He understood her, and, stooping down, laid gently on the poor pale lips his own—almost as white and cold. Then, for a brief space, there was a great stillness—a stillness as of Death. An awful sound broke the silence—a dull, smothered cry, between groan and wail, that haunted the solitary hearer to her dying day—a cry wrung from the first despair of a broken-hearted man, who, henceforth, was to be alone for evermore.

Grace Beauclerc shivered in every limb, for she knew that all was over. But even then she had presence of mind enough to refrain from summoning any one from without. Helen was past human aid, and Grace knew that she could not serve her better now than by keeping for awhile curious eyes and ears away.

She found Alan standing, with his head resting on his arm that was coiled round one of the pillars of the canopy. He did not seem aware of his sister's entrance, and never spoke or stirred as she cast herself down by the side of the dead, pressing kiss after kiss on the sweet, quiet face, and weeping passionately.

How long they remained thus neither could have told. All at once the door of the outer room opened quickly, and Beauclerc lifted the curtain and stood in the doorway. The first glance told him the truth. He walked straight up to the foot of the bed, and gazed steadily for a few seconds on the wreck of marvellous beauty that lay there so still; at last he muttered between his teeth,

'It is best—far best—so.'

Then he passed round to where his wife was lying, and wound his arm round her waist and raised her gently.

'Darling Gracie, you must rouse yourself. It

seems hard, I know, but this cruel night does not even give time for mourning. We must leave this instantly. I have ordered the carriage, and, Alan, I have ordered your horses too. You can find lodging within two miles, but you must not stay here five minutes longer. It is no place for any of us. Clydesdale is in the house at this moment.'

For many hours Grace Beauclerc's nerves and strength had been sorely tried, but had never given way up to this moment. She broke down utterly now, marking the ghastly change in her brother's face, and the murderous meaning of his eyes, as he moved slowly and silently towards the door. She wrenched herself out of her husband's clasp, and threw herself in Alan's way with a wild cry of terror.

'Heaven help us! Have we not suffered enough to-night without this last horror? Alan, you shall never meet while I have sense to prevent it. Algy, wont you stop him? Don't you see that he is mad?'

Beauclerc strode forward and laid his strong grasp on Wyverne's breast.

'Yes, you *are* mad,' he said, sternly. 'You shall not pass out of this room, if I can prevent it, to work such bitter wrong against that dead woman, who loved you only too well. Cannot you see that if

you retaliate on her husband to-night, her name will be dishonoured for ever and ever? She has suffered enough for you to sacrifice your selfish vengeance. Alan, listen now; you will thank God on your knees that you did so hereafter.'

Wyverne gazed in the speaker's face, and as he gazed the devilish fire died out of his eyes. He passed his hand over his forehead twice or thrice as if bewildered, and then walked aside to the darkest corner of the room, leaning his face against the wall; when he turned round again it was settled and calm.

'You are quite right,' he said, slowly. '*I was* mad, and forgot everything. You need fear nothing now. I only ask you to trust me. I will see Clydesdale before I go; but I swear I will not speak one angry word. We will go down directly. Leave me here only three minutes, and I will follow you.'

They did trust him; they went into the outer room, and never thought of listening or lifting the curtain. It is an example that we may well imitate.

All this while the Earl sat down-stairs alone, in such an agony of remorse and shame that, in spite of his past brutality and tyranny, his worst enemy might have spared reproach. He knew that Helen's

state was hopeless, though he had not heard yet that the end had come. He thought of her, as he saw her first, in the radiant bloom of her imperial beauty. He thought of her, as he saw her last, pale and exhausted and death-like after his savage frenzy had vented itself. He *did* repent heartily now, and felt as if he would have given ten years of his life to undo the wrong and make ample amends. And still, the voice that none of us can stifle for ever kept whispering, 'Too late—too late!'

He was musing thus in miserable anticipation of the next news, when the door opened slowly, and Wyverne entered, fully equipped for his departure.

What passed between these two will never be known. Beauclerc, who stood outside within ear-shot, ready to interfere in case Alan's self-control should fail, heard absolutely nothing. At first the Earl's harsh, rough voice, though subdued below its wont, sounded at intervals; but Wyverne's deep, sombre monotone, seemed to bear it down, and even this eventually sank so low that not an accent was distinguishable.

At last the lock turned softly, and Wyverne came out. He just pressed Algy's hand in passing, and went straight to the hall-door, where his horses were waiting. Immediately afterwards the hoofs moved slowly away.

It was five minutes or more before the carriage was ready. Beauclerc had put his wife in, and was standing in the hall, making his last preparations, when Clydesdale came up behind him, and took his arm unawares.

The Earl's face was convulsed with grief; his eyes were heavy, and his cheeks seamed with tears; and his voice was broken and low.

'I hardly dare to ask you to stay to-night,' he said; 'but if you would—— Only consider the fearful weather, and your wife's health. If you knew how bitterly I repent! I only heard the truth ten minutes ago.'

Algy Beauclerc could preach patience better than he could practise it. He shook off the detaining hand with a force that made Clydesdale reel, turning upon him the wrathful blaze of his honest eyes.

'I hope you *do* repent,' he said, hoarsely. 'My wife is not strong, but she should lie out on the open moor, sooner than sleep under that accursed roof of yours.'

If he had looked back as he went out he might have seen the Earl recoil helplessly, covering a stricken face with shaking hands.

Wyverne remained at the village inn, not a mile from the park gates, just long enough to rest his horses and men, and then rode back to the Abbey

as fast as blood and bone of the best would carry him. His strained nerves and energies were not relaxed till he got fairly home. There was a sharp reaction, and he lay for some time in a state of half stupor ; but he was never seriously ill. It was no wonder that mind and body should be utterly worn out : the dark ride through such wild weather was trying enough, and he had scarcely tasted food or drink for twenty hours. Twice within the week there came a special messenger from Clydesholme ; it is to be presumed that the errand was one of peace ; for, eight days after Helen's death, Alan Wyverne stood in his place among the few friends and relations who travelled so far to see her laid in her grave. But it was noticed that neither at meeting nor parting did any word or salutation pass between him and the Earl. Alan arrived only just in time for the funeral, and left immediately afterwards, without setting his foot over the threshold of Clydesholme.

No one saw anything of Wyverne for some weeks. When he reappeared in society he looked certainly older, but otherwise his manner and bearing and temper remained much the same as they had been for the last four years.

That night left its mark on others besides him. It was long before Beauclerc recovered his genial,

careless elasticity of spirit ; and for months his wife scarcely slept a night without starting and moaning in her dreams. Judging from outward appearance, Clydesdale was the person most strongly and permanently affected by the events just recorded. He was never the same man again ; his temper was still often harsh and violent, but the arrogant superciliousness, and intense appreciation of himself and his position, had quite left him. The lesson, whatever it was, lasted him his life. Very few of the many who were pleased or profited by the alteration in the Earl's character, guessed at what a fearful cost the improvement had been made.

It seemed as if poor Helen had felt for some time before her death that the end was fast approaching. They found not only her will, which had been executed when she was last in London, but divers letters, not to be delivered till after her decease. There was a very large legacy to Grace Beauclerc, and some minor ones to old servants and pensioners. All the residue of the vast sum at her disposal was bequeathed to her father, without condition or reserve. Her jewels—with the exception of Lord Clydesdale's gifts before and after marriage, which reverted to him—were left to Mrs. Brabazon. There was no letter for Wyverne, and no mention of his name ; but Maud sent him a casket, which

had been in her hands for some time past. It contained three of Alan's letters, a few trifling relics of their brief engagement, a thick packet in Helen's handwriting, bearing a comparatively recent date, and a small exquisite miniature, taken before her beauty had begun to fade. That casket was the crown jewel of the testament.

The void that her death made in society was not easily filled up; but after a while the world rolled on, as if she had never been. The Squire looked broken and grey, and more careworn than when his affairs had been most desperate. He knew scarcely anything of the terrible truth, but a vague remorse haunted and bore him down. Lady Mildred's face was inscrutable as ever, but her smiles grew rarer and more artificial day by day. Max Vavasour, after the first emotion of sorrow, troubled himself little about what was past and gone. If he ever realized his sister's sacrifice, he looked upon it as a great political necessity—to be deplored, but not to be repented of. Maud Brabazon felt as if she could never bring herself to wear the jewels that she inherited; but she got over these scruples in time; and, at the first drawing-room of the following season, her sapphires and diamonds were generally envied and admired.

When I said that in Alan Wyverne there was

little outward alteration, I ought to have limited the assertion. Men would have told you so ; but maids and matrons are sharper-sighted, and their report would have been very different: *they* knew how utterly he was changed. Their society still had an attraction for him ; and he was frank, and kind, and gentle as ever, when a woman was in presence ; but a word never escaped his lips that could be construed into anything warmer than friendship and courtesy. The most intrepid coquette refrained instinctively from wasting her *calineries* and seductions there : she might as well have sought a lover in a deserted statue-gallery of the Vatican.

How Alan fared when he was quite alone it would be hard to say. Such seasons were rare, except at the dead hours of night, when sleep comes naturally to any constitution, unless some powerful momentary excitement is at work ; for he mixed more in general society than he had done for years. I doubt if he did not suffer less acutely than when Helen was alive, and in her husband's power. He was at least free from the torments of anxiety and apprehension. If in this world of ours we can defy these two enemies of man's peace, we have gained no mean victory over Fate.

CHAPTER XIV.

MORITURI TE SALUTANT.


IT is a clear breezy night, out in the midst of the Atlantic, the mighty steam-ship, *Panama*, ploughs her way through the long, sullen 'rollers,' steadily and strongly, as if conscious of her trust, and of her ability to discharge it—the safe carriage of three hundred lives. A few wakeful passengers still linger on deck; amongst them is Alan Wyverne; the restless demon, ever at his elbow, has driven him abroad again, to see what sport may be found on the great Western prairies.

Suddenly there is a trampling of hurrying feet between decks, and a sailor rushes up the companion and whispers to the officer of the watch, who descends with a scared face; in five minutes more a terrible cry rings from stem to stern, waking the soundest sleeper aboard—'Fire!—fire!'

Can you form any idea of the horror and confusion that ensue, when hundreds of human creatures wake from perfect security, to find themselves

face to face with death? I think not. No one can realize the scene, except those few who have witnessed it once, and who see it in their dreams till they die. No man alive can say for certain if his nerve will stand such a shock, and the bravest may well be proud, if he emerges from such an ordeal without betraying shameful weakness. I speak of a mixed and undisciplined crowd—not of trained soldiers; we have more than one proof of what *these* can do and endure. I think that those who died at Thermopylæ were less worthy of the crown of valour, than the troopers who formed up on deck and stood steady in their ranks, till every woman and child was safe in the boats, and till the *Birkenhead* went down under their feet.

Nevertheless, at such emergencies, a few are always found who single themselves out from the rest, as if determined to prove what daring and devotion manhood can display at extremity. First and foremost among these, on this occasion, was Alan Wyverne. He never lost his presence of mind for an instant. Yet he had accidentally become possessed of a secret that few on board had any idea of. English powder was at a high premium in America, just then; and the captain had shipped, at his own private risk, and against his orders, enough to blow all the fore part of the vessel to shivers. Alan



reached his cabin before the first upward rush came, and made his preparations deliberately. They were very short and simple. He opened a certain steel casket and took out a packet and a miniature, which he secured in his breast; then passing his arm through the port-hole, he dropped the casket into the sea; a sharp pang of pain flitted across his face as he did so, but he never hesitated; that one fact told plainly enough his opinion of the crisis. Then he buckled round his waist a broad leather belt, from which, among other instruments, hung a long sheathed hunting-knife; he put some biscuits and cakes of portable soup, and a large flask of brandy, into the pockets of a thick boat-cloak, which he threw over his arm; then, after casting round a keen hurried glance, as if to assure himself he had forgotten nothing, he left the cabin, and with some difficulty made his way on deck.

It was a ghastly chaos of tumult and terror—a babel of shouts, and cries, and groans, and orders to which no one gave heed, while over all rose the roar and hiss of escaping steam, for they had stopped the engines at the first alarm, and the *Panama* lay in the trough of the sea—a huge, helpless log; though the weather was by no means rough, the ‘rollers’ never quite subside out there in mid-ocean. The flames beginning to burst out of one of the fore

hatchways, threw a weird, fantastic glare on half-dressed, struggling figures, and on white faces convulsed with eagerness or fear; and all the while the clear autumn moon looked down, serenely indifferent to human suffering; even so, she looked down on Adam's agony, on the night that followed the Fall.

Personal terror and the consciousness of guilt, had made the captain utterly helpless already; but the chief-officer was a cool-headed Scotchman, a thorough seaman, and as brave as Bayard; he was exerting himself to the utmost, backed by a few sailors and passengers, to keep the gangway clear, so as to lower the boats regularly. In spite of their efforts, the first sank almost as soon as she touched the water, stove in against the side through the slipping or breaking of a 'fall.' At last they did get the launch fairly afloat, and were equally successful with the two remaining cutters.

There was manhood and generosity enough in the crowd to allow most of the women and children to be lowered without interference; but soon it became terribly evident that fully a third of those on board must be left behind, from absolute want of boat-room. Then the real, selfish struggle began, some of the sailors setting the example, and all order and authority was at an end. As Alan stood

in the background, a man came up behind him and touched his arm, without speaking. It was Jock Ellison, whose father and grandfather had been keepers before him at the Abbey; he had accompanied Wyverne through Africa and India; his constitution and strength seemed climate-proof, no peril disturbed his cheerful equanimity, and he would have laid down his life to serve his master any day, as the merest matter of duty.

It did Alan good to see the handsome, honest, northern face, and the bright, bold, blue eyes close to his shoulder. He smiled as he spoke.

'We're in a bad mess, Jock, I fear. Keep near me, whatever happens. You've always done that so far, and we've always pulled through.'

The stout henchman was slow of speech as he was ready of hand. Before he could reply, Wyverne's attention was called elsewhere.

A few steps from where they were standing, a pale, sickly-looking woman sat alone, leaning against the bulwarks. She felt she was too weak to force a passage through the crowd, so she had sunk down there, hopeless and helpless. She kept trying to hush the wailing of her frightened child, though the big, heavy tears were rolling fast down her own cheeks, moaning low at intervals, always the same words—'Ah! Willie, Willie!' It was her hus-

band's name, and the poor creature was thinking, how hard he had been slaving these three years, to make a home for her and 'Minnie' out there in the West, and how he had been living on crusts to save their passage money—only to bring them to *this*. Alan had been attracted by the pair soon after he came on board, they seemed so very lonely and defenceless, and so wonderfully fond of each other. He had been kind to them on several occasions, and had made great friends with 'Minnie,' a pretty, timid, fragile child of five or six years.

He went up now, and laid his hand gently on the mother's shoulder.

'Don't lose heart,' he said, 'but trust to me. You shall meet your husband yet, please God. You will be almost safe when you are once in a boat. The sea is not rough, and you are certain to be picked up by some vessel before many hours are over. The only difficulty is to get to your place. We'll manage that for you. Don't be frightened if you hear an angry word or two. I can carry Minnie on one arm easily; let me put the other round you; and wrap yourself in this boat-cloak—there's enough in the pockets to feed you for days at a strait, and it will keep you both warm.'

He hardly noticed her gratitude, but whispered a word or two to Jock Ellison, and moved steadily

towards the gangway with both his charges. The gigantic Dalesman kept close to his master's shoulder, rather in his front, cleaving the crowd asunder with his mighty shoulders, utterly regardless of threat or prayer. Some of the better sort, too, when they saw the white, delicate woman, and the little child nestling close to Alan's breast, till her golden hair mingled with his black beard, yielded room, not unwillingly, muttering—'Let *them* pass, at all events: there's time enough yet.' So, Wyverne had nearly reached the gangway, when a haggard, wild-looking man thrust himself violently forward, evidently determined to be the next to descend.

'You shall have the next turn,' Alan said, firmly. 'Let these two go first; you see how helpless they are. They are not strong enough to fight their own battles.'

The other turned upon him furiously.

'Who the —— are you, that give orders here?' he screamed. 'I've as much right to my life as the woman or any of you. I'll have my turn in spite of you all;' and he began to open a clasp-knife.

Alan's face grew very dark and stern.

'I haven't time to argue,' he said; 'stand clear, or take the consequences.'

His adversary sprang at him without another word. Wyverne's arms were so encumbered that he was perfectly defenceless; but just then Jock Ellison's hand came out of his breast, grasping a ponderous revolver by the barrel: the steel-bound butt crashed down full on the man's bare head, and he dropped where he stood, without even staggering. The crowd drew back instinctively; before they closed in again the mother was safe in the boat. Even in her agony of terror she found time to kiss Alan's hand, crying 'that God would reward him.' In truth he *was* rewarded, and that soon.

It was strange—considering their brief acquaintance—to see how the poor child clung to her protector, and how loth she was to leave him, even to follow her mother; it almost needed force to make the thin white arms unloose the clasp of his neck. Young as she was then, 'Minnie' will be a woman before she forgets the kind grave face that leant over her, and the soft voice that said 'Good-bye, little one,' as Wyverne let her go.

He was turning away, when the man that grovelled at his foot began to stir and moan.

'It's hard on him too, poor devil!' some one grumbled in the background; 'his wife is in the boat; she's five months gone with child, and she'll have to starve if she ever gets to land.'

Wyverne stooped down and lifted up his late adversary as tenderly as he had supported the woman.

‘Hold up for a minute,’ he whispered. ‘You brought the blow on yourself; but I promised you should have the next turn. Your wife has hardly missed you yet. And take care of this: it may help you some day.’

He drew a note-case from his pocket as he spoke, and thrust it into the other’s breast: no one attempted to interfere as he put the guiding ropes round the half insensible body, and passed it carefully over the ship’s side. One determined man will cow a crowd at most times; and remember, there were two to the fore, just then.

‘He has *my* place,’ Alan said, simply—as if that were the best answer to any objections or murmurs; and then he made his way back again to the clear part of the deck, his trusty henchman following him still.

The dreadful struggle was over at last; the boats, fully freighted, had pushed off, and lay at a safe distance; those who were left on board knew that they had only to trust now to their own resources, or to a miracle, or to the mercy of Providence. There was scarcely any wind, and what there was

blew in a favourable direction, so that little of the smoke or flame came aft.

Suddenly Wyverne turned to his companion, who sat near him, apparently quite cheerful and composed—

‘You had better look to yourself, Jock. She won’t hold together another quarter of an hour. It’s no distance to swim, and they may take you into a boat still, if you try it. You’ve as good a right to a place as any one now the women are gone.’

The Dalesman’s broad breast heaved indignantly, and there was a sob in his voice as he replied,

‘I’ll do your bidding to the last, Sir Alan ; but you’ll never have the heart to make me leave you. I haven’t deserved it.’

Wyverne knew better than to press the point.

‘Shake hands then, old comrade,’ he said, with a sad smile on his lip. ‘You’ve served me well enough to have your own way for once. I fancy you have few heavy sins to repent of, but you had better make your peace with God quickly ; our minutes are numbered.’

Just then a boat ranged up close under the ship’s quarter, and a smothered voice called on Wyverne

by name. It was the chief officer's, who had determined to make this last effort to save him.

'Let yourself down, Sir Alan, there are ropes enough about, or drop over the side. We'll take *you* in ; you have well deserved it.'

He never hesitated an instant—he had withstood stronger temptations in his time—but leant over the side and answered, in his own firm, clear tones,

'Thanks, a thousand times ; but get back out of danger instantly. It is useless waiting for me ; I don't stir. I have given up my place already, and no power on earth would make me take another man's. If a ship comes near, we may all be saved yet ; if not, we know the worst, and I hope we know how to meet it.'


When the cutter had pushed off, Wyverne sat down again, burying his face in his hands, and remained so for some minutes. Suddenly he looked up, and drew the miniature out of his breast, gazing on it steadfastly and long, with a love and tenderness that no words can express, and a happiness so intense that it savoured of triumph. One of the survivors who chanced to be watching him (unconscious of the catastrophe being so near) said after-

wards that a strange light shone out on Alan's face during those few seconds—a light that came neither from moon nor fire, but as it were from *within*—a light, perchance, such as saints may, one day, see on the faces of angels.

‘Helen—darling Helen,’ he murmured, ‘I always thought and hoped and prayed that I had acted rightly; but I never knew it till now.’

He pressed the picture to his lips, and kissed it twice or thrice fervently. Let us hope that in that impulse there mingled nothing of sinful passion; for it was the last of Alan Wyverne's life.

In a moment there came an awful smothered roar—a crash of rending timbers and riven metal—all the fore-part of the vessel seemed to melt away, scattered over air and water in a torrent of smoke and flame; the after-part shook convulsively through every joint and seam, and then, with one headlong plunge, went down, like a wounded whale ‘sounding.’ Some half-dozen strong swimmers emerged alive from the horrible vortex, and all these were saved. Brave Jock Ellison, after recovering from the first stunning shock, never attempted to make for the boats, but swam hither and thither, till his colossal strength failed him, hoping to find some trace of his master. But Alan Wyverne never rose



again, and never will—till the sea shall give up her dead.

And now my tale is told.

I have attempted to sketch, roughly, what befel a man very weak and erring—who was often sorely tried—who acted ever up to the light that was given him, at the cost of bitter self-denial and self-sacrifice—who, nevertheless, in this life, failed to reap the tithe of his reward.

Alan Wyverne was strong, up to a certain point ; but he had not faith enough to make him feel always sure that he had done right, in defiance of appearances ; nor principle enough to keep him from repining at results. He could neither comfort himself nor others, thoroughly. He was a chivalrous true-hearted man ; but a very imperfect Christian. He dared not openly rebel against the laws of God ; but he was too human to accept, unhesitatingly, the fulfilment of His decrees. Throughout Alan's life, Honour usurped the place where Religion ought to have reigned paramount : he shrank from shame when he would perhaps have encountered sin.

Just see, how complete was the earthly retribution.

To that one principle—sound enough if it had

not been the ruling one—he sacrificed love, and friendship, and revenge, and life. Yet the happiest moments that he knew for years, were those when he stood face to face with a terrible death—a dead woman's picture in his hand.

THE END.



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